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2017

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

Coetzee, A. A. (2017). *African feminism as decolonising force: a philosophical exploration of the work of Oyeronke Oyewumi*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

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# INTRODUCTION

## I Preliminary remarks

Sub-Saharan African feminist voices have been largely absent from philosophical discourse in the Western and African worlds, but also from global Western feminist debates and the discourses on the decolonisation of Africa. In this dissertation I present the work of Nigerian feminist sociologist Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí as having the power to disrupt sub-Saharan African philosophy, Western feminist thought and discourses on African decolonisation in highly significant and surprising ways. The idea is to show how Oyěwùmí as African feminist, who is rendered inaudible and invisible in dominant processes and sites of knowledge production, occupies a unique epistemological position that is rich in resources to subvert, rupture and enrich the dominant systems of knowledge. In this introduction I will briefly introduce Oyěwùmí's work, the reception of her work, and the theoretical fields to which she contributes. I will also outline my main questions, explain my use of certain terms, and provide a chapter summary.

## II A brief introduction to Oyěwùmí and the reception of her work

Oyěwùmí is a Nigerian feminist scholar who is an associate professor in sociology at Stony Brook University in the United States. She grew up in Nigeria, attended the University of Ibadan and later moved to the United States to study at Berkeley. Oyěwùmí is one of the most famous figures in sub-Saharan African feminist thought. She was put on the map with the publication of her book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) in which she offers a postcolonial feminist critique of Western dominance in African knowledge production, focusing specifically on gender relations among the Yorùbá people of Nigeria. She has written numerous articles on African feminism and edited three other books, namely *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (2003), *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (2005) and *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities* (2010). In 2016 she published a new book, called *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity*.

Oyěwùmí argues that gender is a colonial imposition in Yorùbá society which led to the fundamental distortion of all areas of life. She shows that the colonial systems imposed on Yorùbá entail more than a socio-political reordering of gender relations, but represent a different construction of the subject and the world. Oyěwùmí (1997) famously argues that the category of 'woman' did not exist in precolonial Yorùbá thought and society and that its existence in present day Yorùbá society is a product of colonial rule in Nigeria. According to Oyěwùmí the category of 'woman' operative in Western thought and also in Western feminism inevitably designates a subordinate position that is only defined in negative terms in relation to man. She claims that in precolonial Yorùbá society differences in sexed bodies did not translate into this kind of hierarchy. She also criticises Western feminism for assuming the existence of this hierarchical gender scheme when analysing Yorùbá society, thereby reproducing and perpetuating this foreign scheme in Yorùbá society. In her book *Invention of Women* Oyěwùmí writes in general terms about the epistemic shift brought about by

the colonial imposition of gender on Yorùbá society. In her latest book *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* she explains the exact nature of this shift as ‘a move away from the indigenous seniority-based matripotent ethos to a male-dominant, gender-based one’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:7). In this book Oyěwùmí regards the mother (or *Iya*) to occupy a central position in the precolonial epistemology of the Yorùbá people. She therefore explores the precolonial Yorùbá epistemology<sup>1</sup> and the shift that was caused by colonialism with reference to the notion of motherhood and the concept of ‘matripotency’ (the supremacy of motherhood) (Oyěwùmí 2016:7).

As mentioned above, Oyěwùmí is a sociologist, accordingly, to a large extent her analysis is ethnographical. However, she deems her project to be first and foremost epistemological. In the opening line of the preface to her book *Invention of Women* she writes: ‘[t]his book is about the epistemological shift occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on Yorùbá discourse’ (Oyěwùmí 1997: ix). She uses her ethnographical description and sociological understanding of the precolonial Yorùbá society as basis for making the philosophical argument that the dominant (Western) categories through which we understand the world are not universal, but culturally specific and therefore contingent. In this thesis I will demonstrate that her work is capable in the first instance of dethroning Western ‘Truths.’ My interest in Oyěwùmí sprouts from the radicalism of the philosophical claims she is making and its significance from a feminist philosophical perspective. She goes further than other sub-Saharan feminist African scholars by not only arguing that sub-Saharan African societies had different ways of organising gender relations than the West, but that the very concept of gender is a Western construct. This has made her a very controversial and mostly unpopular voice in sub-Saharan African scholarship. Although *Invention of Women* won the American Sociological Association’s 1998 Distinguished Book Award in the Gender and Sex category, the praise of Oyěwùmí’s work seems to always have been overshadowed by the criticism. Scholars who praise her for the originality and interestingness of her work, mostly do not do that without expressing reservations about the way in which she generalises in her reading of both Yorùbá culture and Western feminism (See for example King [1998] and Geiger [1999]). Moreover, many scholars dispute the empirical veracity of her claims. Nigerian feminist philosopher Oyèrónké Olajubu (2004) argues simply that Oyěwùmí’s claim that gender was not an organising principle in precolonial Yorùbá society is empirically wrong. She argues that gender played a significant role in Yorùbá society and illustrates this on various levels.<sup>2</sup> African American scholar J. Lorand Matory (2005) makes the same point. Similarly, Nigerian feminist scholar Amina Mama accuses Oyěwùmí of ‘inventing an imaginary precolonial community in which gender did not exist’ and that ‘there is ample evidence to suggest that gender, in all its diverse manifestations, has long been one of the central organising principles of African societies, past and present’ (Mama 2001:69).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It will be seen in this dissertation that Oyěwùmí argues that colonisation subjugated and marginalised the local epistemes of indigenous societies. In her research she explores the endogenous knowledges and categories of precolonial Yorùbá society.

<sup>2</sup> Olajubu does however concede that gender was different from the Western understanding thereof in so far as gender conceptions were not limited to sexual anatomy, but were configured in a complex and fluid manner (Olajubu 2004:42).

<sup>3</sup> Oyěwùmí is criticised also on theoretical and ideological grounds by Olupona (2002), Bakare-Yusuf (2003a) Peel (2002) and Olajubu (2004, 2003) among others.

However, as postcolonial feminist scholarship has been gaining momentum,<sup>4</sup> more scholars from different parts of the world have been making the point that gender (as a system based on a binary and hierarchical division between man and woman) is a concept that is not indigenous to their cultures and was imposed in their societies through Western colonial rule. It is for example argued that before colonisation, all Native American societies acknowledged three to five genders (see Jacobs, S. Wesley, T and Lang, S. [eds.] 1997). Maria Lugones names Silberblatt (1990;1998), Dean (2001), Pozo (Pozo and Ledezma 2006), Calla and Laurie (2006), Marcos (2006) and de Ayala (2009) as feminist scholars who show that gender is a colonial imposition in different South American societies. Also many precolonial Asian societies were characterised by gender pluralism that is not based on a binary division at all (see Wieringa 2010). The idea that gender as we know it is a construct of Western colonial modernity<sup>5</sup> is therefore becoming more commonplace. In this dissertation, I read Oyěwùmí's work against this background and argue that her assertion that gender is a Western colonial construct that was imposed on an 'ungendered' Yorùbá society is therefore not as preposterous as it is often made out to be by her critics.

In this dissertation, I move beyond these discussions pertaining to the ethnographic status of Oyěwùmí's work. I rather engage with and develop the philosophical contribution and implications thereof.

My aim is to present Oyěwùmí's feminist work as an important decolonising African feminist project with the potential to disrupt and unsettle Western feminism as well as sub-Saharan African philosophy. I do this by placing Oyěwùmí in dialogue with sub-Saharan African philosophy and with Belgian feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray, I am pursuing the double aim of firstly setting up a dialogue between Oyěwùmí and these discourses and secondly, of showing how these discourses are ruptured in the process. In some places I also relate Oyěwùmí's thought to the work of other Western feminist philosophers like Simone De Beauvoir, Christine Battersby and Adriana Cavarero. In other words, this dissertation is firstly a provisional attempt to situate the work of Oyěwùmí in relation to the Western tradition of feminist philosophy as well as to sub-Saharan African philosophy, to ask where the openings for dialogue are and what such dialogues can reveal about and contribute to her position. At the same time my aim is to illustrate how Oyěwùmí's work unsettles and challenges the discourses of Western feminist thinking and sub-Saharan philosophy, and thus how her African feminist position contributes to both.

In the process I show that on a philosophical level her position is more sophisticated and robust than what her critics often make it out to be and that it is defensible from within both sub-Saharan African philosophical and Western feminist traditions. I also show how Oyěwùmí's work at the same time raises significant questions and forces important

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<sup>4</sup> This momentum was sparked with Mohanty's influential essay 'Under Western Eyes' (1986) in which she questions the production of the 'Third World woman' as a homogenous category in Western feminist texts, followed by Gayatri Spivak (1993) who also developed a critique of the homogenising tendency within Western discourse when discussing the 'third world'. Other early leading and trendsetting postcolonial feminist works were Cheyla Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995) and, Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire* (1993).

<sup>5</sup> In this dissertation I understand the concept of modernity in the same way as it is understood by the Colonial/Modern Research Group (see Chapter Three of this dissertation for more information about them). This group argues domination of others outside Europe, and the concomitant subalternisation of knowledge and cultures of these other groups, to be a necessary dimension of modernity (Escobar 2007:184). In this sense there is no modernity without coloniality (this term refers to ongoing colonial relations despite the formal ending of colonialism, the term is explained in detail in Chapter Three).

corrections on these dominant systems of knowledge. Sociologist Jimi O. Adesina who is one of the only African scholars who praises Oyěwùní unambiguously,<sup>6</sup> argues that unlike a lot of African scholars, Oyěwùní does not merely supply data to validate Western theory, but allows her data to produce conceptual outcomes appropriate to the uniqueness of the data, often challenging Western theory, concepts and assumptions. Because she took her locale seriously enough to engage with it without undue anxieties of what established Western knowledges have to say, she enabled ‘an important, epistemic, shift in our understanding of a global idea of gender’ (Adesina 2010:9). It is this disruptive epistemic power in particular that I am interested in.

### III African feminist scholarship: an outline

African women’s writing first started emerging in the 1970s in literary form. Pinkie Mekgwe, feminist scholar and social scientist from Botswana, explains that in the 1970s African women’s writing set out to dispel misrepresentations of African womanhood that proliferated in African literature (written by African men) at the time (Mekgwe 2006: 13). Flora Nwapa’s novels *Efuru* (1960) and *Idu* (1970), Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa* (1970) and Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) are examples of this revisionary form of writing. These writers set the tone for African feminists in other disciplines to begin exploring gender issues in their societies. The early African feminists were reluctant to claim the term feminism, because the term was argued to place the white, Western woman at its centre and ignore or marginalise the specific problems of African women (Arndt 2000:710). It was also argued that Western feminists actively take part in the oppression of third world women in so far as the conceptual paradigm in which they operate is informed with racism and cultural imperialism (Arndt 2000:711). This problematic was delineated strikingly in the seminal work *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1986) edited by (non-African) postcolonial scholars Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres. In her essay, Mohanty argues famously that Western feminist theory presents itself as a universal phenomenon in ways that disguise its profoundly Western concerns and biases.

As an aside: it is important to understand that African women’s rejection of the term ‘feminism’ as Western, does not mean that practices of women’s resistance were a Western invention. Ama Ata Aidoo argues that feminism has been practiced by African women for a long time ‘as part of our heritage’ (Ata Aidoo quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:10). She writes: ‘It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad’ (Ata Aidoo quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:10). Yorùbá scholar Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues that in most African cultures there have been indigenous manifestations of resistance and activism among women going back to precolonial times (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 207-243). Zimbabwean born South African feminist scholar and public intellectual Anne McClintock also writes in this regard: ‘denouncing all feminisms as imperialist [...] erases from memory the long histories of women’s

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<sup>6</sup> There are also postcolonial scholars like Maria Lugones (2007 and 2010) and Greg Thomas (2007) who, although not specifically bestowing praise, seem to accept the validity and significance of Oyěwùní’s position, and who incorporate her arguments into their scholarship. The same goes for the Nigerian philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu who does not often refer to Oyěwùní directly, but whose research on the Igbo resonates, on a general, philosophical level, with a lot of what Oyěwùní is saying with regard to the Yorùbá.

resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies. [...] Many women's mutinies around the world predated Western feminism or occurred without any contact with Western feminists' (McClintock 1995: 384). Similarly, South African feminist philosopher Louise Du Toit writes: 'if the logical possibilities of feminism are not artificially limited to those Western versions that have so far become globally dominant, then it must be clear that feminist (in the broadest sense of the term) traditions have existed in Africa as far back as we can go' (Du Toit 2009:421). Moreover, Amina Mama writes that African women's practices of resistance have in fact always been part of the early conceptualisations of so-called 'Western feminism', even if it is not properly acknowledged as such (Mama 2001:60). As an example she mentions how the English dispatched anthropologists like Sylvia Leith Ross and Judith Van Allen to make sense of the Igbo Women's War of the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the struggle for women's empowerment did not come from Europe to Africa in a unidirectional way as it is easily assumed.

The discomfort and resentment the term 'feminism' evoked in African scholars led them to develop African alternatives to it. The idea was to develop a feminism that addresses and takes seriously the contexts and needs of *African* women. Nigerian female scholars were the most dominant and prolific in this regard. Nigerian 'feminist' poet, activist and critic Molara Ogundipe Leslie writes in 1987 that the African woman needs to be conscious not only of the fact that she is a woman, but that she is both an African and a third world person (Ogundipe Leslie 1987). In 1994 she presented 'Stiwanism' (an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as an alternative to Western feminism with an emphasis on social and economic equality with men in Africa. In the early 1990s Catherine Acholonu, another Nigerian scholar and writer, developed 'motherism,' an ideology that embraces motherhood, nature and nurture as an alternative to feminism. Nigerian academic Obioma Nnaemeka developed 'nego-feminism' which is grounded in negotiation and the idea of 'no-ego'. She writes 'African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise, knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal landmines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal landmines' (Nnaemeka 2003: 377-378). Similarly, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, a Nigerian scholar who teaches African literature in America, developed the concept of 'African womanism'<sup>8</sup> in the 1980s. Ogunyemi's notion of African Womanism is the best known African alternative to

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<sup>7</sup> Colonial transformations in Igbo society led to the Women's War in 1929 against the colonial administration. This war was explicitly fought by Igbo women against taxation and oppressive administrative systems which contributed to the growing disempowerment and social irrelevance of Igbo women in the new political dispensation. Igbo women insisted on the restoration of the traditional judicial system in which women could take part and had a voice. These aims were understood to advance justice for everyone in so far as it would curb the power of the corrupt colonial system of justice (Nzegwu 2012:91). For a detailed discussion of the Women's War and women's resistance, see Nzegwu (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Susan Arndt (2000:711) explains that Alice Walker, the African American author, coined the term 'womanism' to refer to a 'black feminist or feminist of color [who is] committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male *and* female' (Walker 1983:xi). Even though African women gained great inspiration from Black American womanism, there existed a need to develop a particular African brand of womanism in so far as African women felt their situation, culture and problems to be different to those of African-American women (Arndt 2000:711-712). In an interview, Arndt asks Ogunyemi to explain the genesis and basic ideas of African womanism to which Ogunyemi responds by distinguishing African womanism from Black womanism: 'When I was thinking about womanism, I was thinking about those areas that are relevant for Africans but not for blacks in America – issues like extreme poverty and in-law problems, older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives, or men oppressing their wives. Religious fundamentalism is another African problem that is not really relevant to African Americans – Islam, some Christian denominations, and also African traditional religions. These are problems that have to my mind to be covered (*sic*) an African-womanist perspective. So I thought it was necessary to develop a theory to accommodate these differences' (Arndt 2000:714 -715).

Western feminism and Black womanism (Arndt 2000:712). The purpose and meaning of womanism becomes very clear in this famous quote by Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta:

I will not be called feminist [...], because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that... I don't like being defined by them.... It is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, 'Okay, I can't build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting.' That is my brand of feminism (Emecheta 1997:7).

This shows the way in which these women embraced the politics of feminism, but not the label. Emecheta is resisting the epistemological power of Western feminists to define all women's lives. Importantly, the quote of Emecheta also highlights the way in which African feminists felt that Western feminism did not address the issues that needed to be addressed by African feminism. It was argued that the gender oppression of African women is interwoven with other political, economic, cultural and social forms of oppression that are not taken into account in Western feminism, such as racism, neocolonialism, capitalism, religious fundamentalism and dictatorial and corrupt political leadership (Arndt 2000:710-711). Olabisi Aina, a Nigerian social scientist, argues for example, that the following issues that are of concern to African feminists are omitted from the Western feminist agenda: first, successfully combining mothering and nurturing roles with productive ones; second, the question of how one is to get men to appreciate and join in the fight against oppressive societal structures that are created by both men and women; third, the question of how to retain traditional structures that are supportive of women, while at the same time fighting oppressive traditions like child marriage and widowhood taboos; fourth, the question of how to sustain stable marital relations and to cope with practices like polygamy and inheritance rights; and lastly, the question of negotiating the tension between traditional African communal life and the emerging individualistic tendencies of Western liberalist capitalism (Aina 1998: 71–72).

Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, an anthropologist who carried out extensive field research in Nigeria for over thirty years, highlights certain differences between Western societies and African societies which render Western feminism inappropriate and irrelevant to an African context. These differences are arguably even more fundamental than those listed by Aina:

The facets of womanhood and empowerment in Africa are subtle, complex, esoteric, and multidimensional; power balance in gender relations differs from the conventional one-dimensional Western paradigm. Therefore, openness to a completely new definition of basic concepts, such as time, divinity, nature, power, etc. is necessary if we are to grasp the modalities for power distribution in African society at the political, village, and household levels, and in gender relations (Jell-Bahlsen 1998:101).

Jell-Bahlsen's point is therefore that African feminist scholarship cannot simply apply Western feminist work to their own contexts, but that their different contexts require a rethinking and rearticulation of even the most basic or fundamental concepts.

From the different ways in which the central concept of womanism is described by different scholars it becomes clear that the early African womanists distinguished their brand of feminism from Western feminism in certain important ways. First, they found it important not to exclude men, but to cooperate with them (because African women and men are united in a common struggle against their dehumanisation through colonialism, Western hegemony and racism; as will be discussed in detail in the next section). Second, motherhood, childrearing and kinship are afforded central importance. Third, it is a framework that centres material experience and struggle (rather than just theory). Fourth, it is a framework that takes context and positionality very seriously. Five, womanism takes into account that the African woman's struggle is often one that takes place in the context of multiple oppressions or hegemonic frameworks, including, apart from patriarchy socio-economic exclusion, religious fundamentalism, colonial and racist regimes and policies, and corrupt or dictatorial political systems.<sup>9</sup> The different womanists tend to emphasise different things (see for example Abrahams [2002], Steady [1987], Arndt [2002] and Kolawole [2002]). Another crucial component of the early sub-Saharan feminist work was the 'critique of Western misrepresentation of African woman's personhood' (Eze 2015: 313). In other words, it entails attempts by African scholars to contest the way in which African women are portrayed in Western scholarship as helpless victims without agency. This is seen most famously in the work of Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyěwùmí (1997). These scholars showed that contrary to Western assumptions, African scholars have not been helpless, but occupied positions of power in their societies. Nigerian Igbo philosopher and artist Nkiru Nzegwu's work does something similar.

Today, the term 'feminism' has lost its sting for most African feminists, especially since Western feminists have reconsidered their earlier simplistic paradigms and have formulated more complex theories taking into account the importance of race, class, culture, context and history in configuring gender relations. African feminists now use the term feminism, but work to shape its meaning and application to fit specific African contexts. Examples of prominent feminist figures today in African scholarship and popular culture (apart from Oyěwùmí) are Amina Mama, a Nigerian psychologist who has addressed women in government and politics in a variety of African contexts, such as militarism, women's organisations and movements, race and subjectivity; Sylvia Tamale, a Ugandan feminist legal scholar who works on Third World women and the law and gender and sexuality among other things; Nkiru Nzegwu a Nigerian Igbo artist, philosopher and feminist scholar who publishes on African art, culture and philosophy, and feminist literary scholars Grace Musila and Chielozone Eze. However, importantly, feminist voices remain marginal to most African intellectual contexts and completely absent from others, most notably philosophy. Moreover, African feminist voices have not been integrated in the Western or global feminist debates. An exception here would be Nigerian writer

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<sup>9</sup> Ogundipe-Leslie writes famously that 'the African woman has six mountains on her back, namely: 'one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neocolonialism?), oppressive traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc., the third is her backwardness (neo-colonialism?); the fourth is man; the fifth is her color, her race; and the sixth is herself' (*sic*) (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:24).



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who became world famous for her book *Americanah* (2013) (so famous that Beyonce quotes Adichie in one of her songs) and whose book *We Should All Be Feminists* had been given in 2015 to every sixteen year old child in Sweden by the Swedish Women's Lobby in order to start discussions about gender equality and feminism. Unfortunately Adichie's global impact is the exception to the rule. In the next section I explore this exclusion or marginality of African feminist scholarship.

#### **IV African feminism and African feminist philosophy in context**

In this section I firstly present African feminist thought as existing in the tension between, on the one hand, decolonisation or the liberation of African people and on the other hand, woman's emancipation. Secondly, I explain how the voice of the African woman is doubly excluded from philosophy on account of her being African *and* a woman. In this way I contextualise the exclusion of African feminism from African intellectual discourses on decolonisation, Western feminism and African and Western philosophy.

##### *a) The tension facing African feminism*

African feminists, as women *and* Africans are committed to two struggles: namely the fight for the empowerment of African women and the fight for decolonising African societies. Du Toit explains that 'African feminist work must thus of necessity be unambiguously marked by a double resistance to oppression: it must do justice to the anti-colonial as well as to the female struggles against indigenous patriarchies' (Du Toit 2008:420). Similarly, Nigerian philosopher and literary scholar Chielozone Eze writes that African feminism has been 'shaped by the combined fear of a backlash in the traditional, patriarchal sectors of African societies and the need to challenge the Western domination of ideas about Africa' (Eze 2015: 312). However the allegiances to both woman's emancipation and African liberation as equally crucial for African feminist projects, often stand in deep tension with each other, because feminism is often characterised as alien to Africa (Du Toit 2008:420) as outlined in the previous section. Eze explains in this regard that '[f]or many Africans, feminism is a curse word' (Eze 2015: 312).<sup>10</sup> Nigerian scholar Glo Chukukere goes further and writes that feminism is an outright negation of Africanness (Chukukere 1998:134). In African nationalist rhetoric the attempts of feminists to transform gender relations in African societies are often framed as neocolonial and 'unAfrican' and therefore pitted *against* sub-Saharan African cultural and traditional identities. Resisting the transformation of gender relations is therefore often regarded to serve the fight against the continued neocolonial imposition of Western values onto African societies and as therefore being part of the preservation of African tradition or culture. Du Toit explains in this regard that women's sexual rights (or absence thereof) are often used as a favoured marker of collective ethnic, religious and cultural identity and is treated as a core aspect of that identity (Du Toit 2013:17-18). Construing feminist demands as purely external and in opposition to culture is used as a gesture of opposing Western or other external influences and stabilising the national identity through the control of women's sexed bodies (Du Toit 2013:30).

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<sup>10</sup> See also the work of Nigerian writer, novelist, poet and academic Femi Ojo-Ade (1983) who vehemently criticises feminism as being 'unAfrican' and Nigerian poet, writer and journalist Ibekwe Chinweizu (1990) who dismisses feminism on the same basis.

An obvious example of this is how the practice of female circumcision is vehemently defended and upheld in many parts of Africa in the name of protecting culture. Women's rights are therefore construed in opposition to collective culture and oppressive practices against women are regarded to mark the existence and vitality of an authentic indigenous culture.

In terms of this view feminist struggles for the transformation of gender relations and structures are regarded in African societies as a recolonising force which must be resisted in the name of the struggle for decolonisation in present day Africa. As a result, African feminism's fight for the rights of African women is regarded as a Western or recolonising pursuit and it is excluded from African intellectual discourses aimed at producing indigenous knowledges. On the other hand, fighting for the decolonisation of African societies often in practice requires of African feminists to leave unchallenged the patriarchal elements of indigenous structures, institutions and beliefs, in order to put up a united front. This was very clearly seen in the establishment of South Africa's new democracy in 1994 after Apartheid, where the triumphant narrative about national liberation from apartheid served as a way to keep black women from speaking about sexual violence that they experienced at the hand of the freedom fighters during the liberation struggle (see Du Toit 2009:17).

At the same time, in their fight against the oppression of African women, African feminists find little alliance in Western feminism. African feminist scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997) and Nzegwu (2012) show us that the criticism of African nationalist discourse against *Western* feminism is not necessarily always unfounded in so far as Western feminism often makes itself guilty of grossly distorting and erasing African realities by reading African societies through Western conceptual frameworks. This happens despite the conscious attempts by Western feminists to relativise their own positions as explained above in the previous section. Accordingly, African scholars' rejection of *Western* feminism as something that undermines African cultures and traditions is therefore often (although not always) justified, but on a different basis than what is mostly defended within the African nationalist discourse, namely that Western feminism often approaches African societies through Western conceptual frameworks, thereby supporting and maintaining Western imposed gender frameworks in African societies. On account of the fact that African feminists regard the fight for African liberation and decolonisation just as important as the fight for the empowerment of women, African feminists are weary of Western feminism and most often choose to articulate their theoretical positions outside of Western feminist discourses in order to avoid complicity in, in Nzegwu's words, the reduction of African peoples and cultures to 'vapid forms into Western imagination' (Nzegwu 1996:176).<sup>11</sup>

African feminist scholarship, with its double aim of fighting for the liberation of African people just as much as for the empowerment of African women, therefore ends up on the outside of the dominant African intellectual contexts as well as the dominant global Western feminist debates. Du Toit articulates this dilemma strikingly by writing that 'African women typically have to negotiate their claims [...] to their own, authentic voice and history, within and

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<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Western feminist scholars show little sign of reading African feminist scholarship and make no visible attempts to properly integrate African feminist viewpoints into their theories and work.

between two systems of pernicious and homogenizing generalization which both render them invisible, voiceless and outside of history' (Du Toit 2008:419).

*b) The uneasy relationships between African philosophy, Western philosophy and feminist philosophy: understanding African feminist philosophy as predicament*

Even though there exists on the one hand, a steadily growing body of African feminist scholarship, and on the other hand, a well-established African philosophical tradition, very little has been done in the field of African feminist philosophy. With a few exceptions, the issue of gender in African societies has not been conceptually addressed by African philosophy (even though a lively gender discourse has emerged in other disciplines like African theology, literary studies, anthropology, history and sociology, as explained above) (Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014: 86). Sophie Oluwole, Nigerian philosopher and academic, wrote years back already: 'When it comes to philosophy proper, it appears that the main figures in the discipline have almost, in a conspiratorial way, avoided feminist discussion' (Oluwole 1998:96). Similarly, in 2011, Thaddeus Metz, an American philosopher working in South Africa on African philosophy, writes that 'extraordinarily few African women practice professional philosophy, and there is little interest in feminism among the men who principally do' (Metz 2011: 24). Accordingly, not only is African philosophy almost completely silent on the issue of feminism, but there are also notoriously few women philosophers.

Nigerian philosopher Sanya Osha explains the predicament of African philosophy,<sup>12</sup> arguing that African philosophy had to undergo an abortion before it could get born eventually (Osha 2006:157). Questions like 'What is African philosophy?' 'Does it exist?' 'What ought to be its foundational methodology?' which dogged the birth of African philosophy kept African philosophers for a long time from actually getting on with doing philosophy (Osha 2006:157). This 'crisis of delivery' marred the progress of African philosophical discourse and limited its emancipatory potential (Osha 2006:157-158). Osha ascribes this crisis of delivery to the fact that, where Western philosophy is a product of a disciplinary quest that is almost three thousand years old in which textual inscription has played a crucial role, African philosophy (as a formal textual discipline) has no such history (Osha 2006:156). Rather, it found its origin in the painful existential matrix of Africa's encounter with post-Enlightenment modernity which entails slavery, apartheid, colonisation and decolonisation (Osha 2006:156). In other words, rather than being rooted in an age old disciplinary quest, African philosophy was born in the context of and in resistance to prolonged attacks on and violent denials of the humanity and rationality of African people. Colonial modernity defined the Western man in terms of his capacity for reason, which distinguished him from the colonised or non-Western people who were regarded to be purely physical creatures reigned by passion (see for example Mbembe [2001] and Fanon [1961]). In this sense the quest of African philosophy was to 'articulate *presence* in the infinite void of nothingness' and in this way reclaiming a lost humanity (Osha 2006:158). Osha explains that because African philosophy had to undertake a process of autogenesis from within a dehumanising existential and epistemic void, its first priority was to construct a mode of African subjecthood,

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<sup>12</sup> For other discussions of this problematic see for example Hountondji (1971), Bodunrin (1979), Gyekye (1997), Masolo (1994), Mudimbe (1982), Owomoyela (1987) and Yai (1977).

after which all other things could follow (Osha 2006:158). As a result gender, which was also largely absent from the Western canon of philosophy for most of its history, was the least of its concerns. The epistemic foundations of the young tradition of African philosophy are therefore decisively masculinist, like those of Western philosophy.

There are many important overlaps between the struggle for existence of African philosophy and the struggle for existence of (Western) feminist philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Like African people, women have been associated with the flesh, have been denied humanity and the capacity of rationality in the history of Western philosophy and like African philosophy, feminist philosophy therefore had to assert its presence from within a void. Osha articulates this by arguing that the 'feminine text' went through a similar crisis of delivery as the African text, namely the problem of creating authentic discourse from within a void (Osha 2006:162). Many Western feminists have dealt with this issue in their work. Australian feminist philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker writes that 'the maternal body occupies the site of a radical silence in the texts of Western philosophy' in so far as these texts 'reveal a masculine imaginary that speaks for the maternal' (Walker 1998:1). This is because the Western philosophical text is rooted in a logic that 'constructs the world as a society of self-generating (masculine) bodies, a world where the re-productive maternal body is replaced by the productive masculine one' (Walker 1998:2). The subject that stands at the centre of this body of thought is a self-created productive subject with a voice which is pitted against woman who is 'silenced as a hysterical body in pain' (Walker 1998:3). She argues that philosophy excludes women by silencing them either by refusing them entry, or by refusing to listen to those who managed to gain access to its privileged domain (Walker 1998:9). French feminist philosopher Michele Le Doeuff demonstrates in her investigation into the language of Western philosophy how philosophical language has constructed a community of male subjects which excludes women (Le Doeuff 1989). Le Doeuff writes: 'Women coming to philosophy do not leave the ordinary world by doing so, but they enter a universe where [...] they often have to face people who do not believe that they can speak' (Le Doeuff 1989:27-28). Le Doeuff argues contemporary philosophical discourse to be patterned on male social intercourse. She writes that:

[...] the philosophical republic is resolutely fraternal. Sometimes the brothers wrestle with each other, sometimes they fraternize, sometimes they fight over who can play at founding fathers, but in every case they are liable to exclude the sisters from their little games' (Le Doeuff 1989:28).

As philosophy is institutionalised today, woman can only enter it as 'loving admirer' (Le Doeuff 1989:54). There are concrete statistics attesting to the exclusion of women from the institution of philosophy and confirming in a concrete way the arguments of these feminist scholars. All over the world the overwhelming majority of philosophy PhDs are awarded to men, and men hold the majority of positions in philosophy at universities. Women are disproportionately under-represented in philosophy institutions worldwide (see for example Jenkins [2014], Haslanger [2008 and 2009] and Tarver [2013]). Men are dominant in determining and embodying the standards of excellence in institutional

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<sup>13</sup> See also Sandra Harding's essay 'The Curious Coincidence of Feminine and African moralities' (1987) in which she argues there to be several parallels between a typical Western feminist ethic and a characteristically African approach to morality and contends that both are born out of a reaction to approaches typical of Western men.

philosophy (Jenkins 2014:163). There is thus a strong argument to be made for the idea that philosophy as a discipline is a male dominant and masculinist institution.

The absence of feminist thought or issues of gender from African philosophy could therefore be at least partly explained with reference to the way in which philosophy as discipline is a universalising discourse which has its historical roots in Western rationality, a concept that is historically defined in opposition to the racial *and* sexual Other. The epistemic foundations of the institution of philosophy are masculine and Western and philosophy is therefore a tradition that historically in principle excludes the thought of Africans *and* of women, thereby rendering the voices of African women doubly inaudible. Moreover, it was seen that Osha explains that the formal tradition of African philosophy which had to fight for a long time for its right of existence, unquestioningly took over the patriarchal foundations of Western philosophy. Also, African philosophy has not yet been forced to acknowledge and face its masculinist foundations, like the Western tradition of philosophy which has been challenged and confronted from various fronts. This helps to explain why African feminist philosophical scholarship today still consists only of a few dispersed and isolated subversive voices that form no coherent body of work or tradition. Importantly, Du Toit (2008) argues convincingly that it is at least plausible to assume that African women are not simply passively excluded from the echelons of philosophy, but that they seem to have actively chosen other avenues for intellectual expression like literature. Du Toit argues that this could be regarded as a strategy of resistance to the abstract and oppressive universalising discourse of philosophy. African women therefore need not be understood as passive victims to their exclusion from philosophy, but also as actively rejecting it as medium for self-expression. The point is, considering the epistemic foundations of the institutionalised discipline of philosophy, it is not surprising that there are almost no African feminist philosophers, nor that the issue of gender is almost not addressed at all within African philosophy.

## **V Oyěwùmí's feminism as decolonising force**

Despite the different contexts from within which they are writing, there exist multiple and significant points of convergence in the work of Irigaray and Oyěwùmí. I use Luce Irigaray's metaphysical analysis of the Western symbolic order to inform, contextualise and deepen the understanding of the workings of the colonial/modern gender system that Oyěwùmí is asserting herself against in her theorising of the alternative precolonial Yorùbá gender systems. Irigaray is a Belgian-born French feminist philosopher. She was a student of Lacan who was ostracised by the Lacanian community after the publication of her book *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) in which she reveals the patriarchal foundations of psychoanalytic theory and in which she demonstrates how philosophy has, since ancient times articulated fundamental epistemological, ontological and metaphysical truths from a male perspective that excludes women. In her work Irigaray provides an in depth metaphysical explanation of the establishment of patriarchy in Western thought (philosophy) and society (politics). She also highlights the complicity of dominant strands of Western feminism in sustaining the patriarchal framework of Western society. I thus explore through her subversive Western feminist perspective, the logic of the Western colonial/modern gender system on a metaphysical level. Irigaray argues that Western patriarchy is rooted in a metaphysics that understands identity in terms of sameness to a unitary ideal and construes all difference in terms of hierarchical dichotomies. Her critique of Western patriarchy overlaps strikingly

with the one of Oyěwùmí. In Chapter Four I will use her in-depth metaphysical analysis of Western patriarchy to construct a better understanding of the implications of the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system on African societies. Her analysis makes clearer what it means when Oyěwùmí suggests that the imposition of colonial/modern gender schemes on African societies meant a disruption of the relational metaphysics underpinning these societies and a shift to a new dichotomous reality in which difference is construed hierarchically. I therefore show how Irigaray is a valuable ally to Oyěwùmí, who can be read as helping to reinforce and strengthen Oyěwùmí's critique of Western philosophy and dominant positions in Western feminism, because Irigaray herself takes in a critical stance towards Western thought and dominant positions in Western feminism. However, I also show how Oyěwùmí is often more radical than Irigaray and how she moves beyond Irigaray with regard to her understanding of subjectivity, relationality and difference I therefore argue that Irigaray's thinking could gain from taking note of Oyěwùmí.

I explained above that African philosophy is still mostly a masculinist venture and does not engage with issues of gender and that African feminists mostly choose other disciplines within which to express themselves. African feminism and African philosophy are therefore to a large extent regarded to be two mutually exclusive domains of knowledge. In this dissertation I try to overcome this rift by showing that Oyěwùmí's feminist position is founded in similar assumptions as those that are central to sub-Saharan African philosophy. Sub-Saharan relational philosophy thus is relevant in the context of Oyěwùmí's theorisation of the Yorùbá gender system as alternative to the colonial/modern gender system. As I will show in Chapter One and Two, Oyěwùmí argues that the colonial/modern gender system is founded in an entirely different 'conceptual scheme' or metaphysics than the precolonial gender systems of the Yorùbá. I argue that implicit in Oyěwùmí's description of the Yorùbá society is a relational understanding of the subject and the world that resonates strongly with the dominant ideas in the Sub-Saharan African tradition of relational philosophy. It is argued within this tradition that in most (precolonial) African cultures subjects, concepts and identity (of all things) in general are not understood in terms of sameness/similarity with a unitary ideal, but constituted in a fluid network of relations with other subjects, concepts and things. Difference rather than sameness therefore sits at the heart of identity in sub-Saharan African thought. A result of this is that the subject is not a fixed and stable entity that is understood in opposition to that which is Other or different, but that change, difference and otherness are part of the very structure of everything that is. I show how Oyěwùmí roots her descriptions and understandings of the precolonial Yorùbá gender system in such a fluid and relational world sense or metaphysics. Accordingly, when she asserts the 'ungenderedness' of the precolonial Yorùbá world, I understand her to base this on her understanding of subjectivity as deeply relational, fluid and non-dichotomous and therefore not reducible to the strict, essentialised, hierarchical and stable gender dyad of the colonial/modern gender system. On this basis I argue that by situating Oyěwùmí in relation to the sub-Saharan African tradition of relational thought it becomes clear that her work reveals the colonial reordering of gender relations in Yorùbá society to have effected a deep disruption of the self-in-relation of these societies (this disruption being sustained in the Western dominant modern system of global capitalism). Working to dismantle the colonial/modern gender system in current day Yorùbá societies as Oyěwùmí is doing, therefore opens up a space for reimagining the Yorùbá subject in terms of the relational philosophies, metaphysics and cosmologies of sub-Saharan African thought and societies. On the other hand, I show how Oyěwùmí's work highlights and challenges problematic gaps and silences in sub-Saharan African philosophy.

By situating the work of Oyěwùmí in relation to work done in Western feminist philosophy and African philosophy in this way, my most significant aim is to show that the feminist project of Oyěwùmí reveals crucial aspects of the colonial encounter between African societies and the West. The decolonising potential of her work lies specifically in the way in which it reveals the fact that gender categories are not universal, neutral, natural or innocent but serve a certain worldview or paradigm. She shows more specifically how the colonial imposition of gender categories is central to the functioning of colonial power which construes difference in hierarchical and dichotomous terms and therefore produces subjects that are defined in opposition or exclusion of one another. She shows how the colonial imposition of gender in Yorùbá society radically undermines the fluid and relational subjectivity of sub-Saharan African thought and culture, but it also works to reduce both woman and the African subject to something less than human and the negative Others of the Western ‘man of reason’. By highlighting the connection between gender and colonialism in African societies, Oyěwùmí is uncovering an important aspect of the Western colonial/modern power matrix that is still in place in African societies and that has remained invisible in analyses that treat colonialism as a gender neutral phenomenon. On this basis I argue that the work of Oyěwùmí offers a deep critique of the discourses pitting women’s emancipation against African culture in so far as she links her African feminist project directly to a dislodging of Western power structures in Africa. I also make the further point that it can be argued that sub-Saharan African relational thought has great feminist and more generally emancipatory potential around human sex and sexuality, in so far as it supports a non-hierarchical and non-dichotomous approach to subjectivity and the world or universe. The implication is that dismantling the Western gender structures in African societies does not only mean that a space opens up to approach things in ways that are more true to African thought and history, but also that embracing African relational ways of thinking offers huge potential for reimagining gender equivalence everywhere, because African thought is underpinned by a metaphysics which enables difference. The relationality of African thought is specifically conducive to the flourishing of difference which allows for persons with all kinds of sexed bodies to claim full subjecthood and to take part in society as full subjects. In this way feminism is not opposed to the indigenous African relational world sense, but inherent thereto.

In this dissertation I therefore provide an in depth philosophical exploration of Oyěwùmí’s position through which I attempt to show the relevance of the excluded epistemological position of radical difference that she represents, and its power to present profound challenges to the self-understanding of the dominant systems of knowledge, the margins of which she is speaking from. Through this philosophical analysis of Oyěwùmí’s work, I attempt to show the crucial value that African feminism can have in both of the struggles it pledges allegiance to, namely decolonisation and the empowerment of (African and non-African) women. Moreover, placing Oyěwùmí in dialogue with Irigaray shows that her theory has relevance beyond the African continent. In my reading of Oyěwùmí I also attempt to show that these struggles are not logically opposed to each other, but that they in fact enforce and support each other in so far as African feminism has a crucial role to play in the decolonisation of African societies and sub-Saharan African relationality is a framework that offers vast potential for gender equivalence.

## VI A note on the distinction between the empirical and the philosophical in the work of Oyěwùmí

Does a philosophical reading of Oyěwùmí on the basis of contested empirical data, as this dissertation aims at, not fall to pieces as soon as the data is disproved? This raises the question of the validity of this dissertation. However, such a line of questioning is problematic on two levels. First, the data that is at stake is not the kind of information that can be conclusively proved or disproved in so far as it regards a precolonial society and a culture in which history and information was not recorded in a written form, but orally transmitted. All the information that we have about this society is constituted of different *reconstructions* by scholars that are based on different interpretations of different cultural products and narratives. It is therefore impossible to prove Oyěwùmí right or wrong for once and for all. The second problem with denying the philosophical validity of this dissertation or Oyěwùmí's work on the basis of the fact that the data her work is rooted in, is contested, is that it does not take into account that empirical data is never 'concept-free'. It is permeated with and shaped by conceptualisation. In fact, it will be seen that this is one of the primary philosophical insights offered by Oyěwùmí's research, namely, that the empirical conclusions drawn by researchers are never purely empirical, but always shaped and structured by the conceptual schema that informs the research. Different empirical facts become visible and gain relevance depending on the particular concepts that are subscribed to.<sup>14</sup> In her book *Invention of Women* Oyěwùmí illustrates this point in detail with regard to the concept of 'gender' and in her latest book *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* she does so with regard to the concept of 'mother'. This is discussed at length in Chapters One and Five of this dissertation. The philosophical and the ethnographical in Oyěwùmí's work are therefore not distinct or divisible. Rather, the empirical claims are informed and shaped just as much by the philosophical claims as *vice versa*.

This is not an unusual form for philosophical work to take in the African traditions, African philosophers generally agree that the focus of philosophical reflections on the African continent, therefore the questions asked and reflected on by African philosophy, must address and be relevant to the life worlds of African people.<sup>15</sup> Consequently most African philosophy is in some way anchored in and intertwined with the cultures, belief systems, societal structures, proverbs and languages of African peoples.<sup>16</sup> Nigerian philosopher Peter Bodunrin writes in this regard: '[t]he African philosopher cannot *deliberately* ignore the study of the traditional belief system of his people. Philosophical problems arise out of real life situations' (Bodunrin 1991:77). There is therefore an ethnological moment in the work of most African philosophers, so that their philosophies are permeated with and given form by the life-worlds from which they are philosophising.<sup>17</sup> This is crucial to enable the generation of indigenous philosophical concepts and understandings that correspond to and are relevant to the specific African contexts, rather than just adopting western philosophical concepts that were born from and respond to an entirely different context and history.

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<sup>14</sup> This argument is famously made by French philosopher Bruno Latour in his book *Laboratory Life* (1979).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this see Bello 2005: 263-264.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the problems with such a reliance on cultural contexts as basis for philosophy, see Janz (2009:122).

<sup>17</sup> There are different trends in African philosophy in which different ways and grades of reliance on ethnographical material can be distinguished. For a detailed discussion of the different trends in African philosophy, see Odera Oruka (1990).



Accordingly, the way in which Oyěwùmí anchors her philosophical claims in ethnographical research is in line with the way in which a lot of philosophy is practiced on the African continent.<sup>18</sup> In fact, she could be argued to attempt exactly what Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu regards to be one of the major aims of African philosophy, namely ‘conceptual decolonisation’ (Wiredu 1995) in so far as she analyses the Yorùbá language (among other things) to elucidate the concepts that Yorùbá people live by and to show the Western colonial heritage, meaning and functioning of the gender vocabulary that is widely assumed to be universal and neutral.

## VII Notes on terminology

In this section, the terminology used in this dissertation is explained, most notably the sex/gender distinction.

### a) *Sex, gender and sexual difference*

In terms of the sex/gender distinction, sex is regarded as referring to the biological traits that distinguish men from women, and gender is understood as the social, cultural and sexual attitude or identity that accompanies the biologically sexed body. American feminist philosopher Ann Cahill explains that this distinction became prominent in liberal feminist scholarship in the 1970s, because the concept of gender allowed feminists to contest the values ascribed to femininity as cultural constructions rather than biological necessities (Cahill 2001:5). Gender was thus seen as the site for the feminist revolution in so far as, while the biological facts of being a woman could not be changed, feminine attitudes and identity could (Cahill 2001:5). Cahill explains that the political goal of liberal feminism could then be understood as a denial of the relevance of (biological) sex (Cahill 2001:5).

In the Western feminist discussion the distinction between sex and gender has been challenged, for instance by Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler. Grosz, an Australian feminist, aims in her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a*

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<sup>18</sup> The controversial empirical basis of Oyěwùmí’s work can be justified in a similar way through the work of many Western feminist philosophers. Feminist philosophers from the 1980s onwards have argued that the universalising nature of philosophy masks its situatedness and leads to the universalization of the reality of the western male (See for example Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* [1985], Genevieve Lloyd’s *The Man of Reason* [1984] and Adriana Cavarero’s *Relating Narratives* [2000]). Prominent examples of feminist attempts to address the false universality of philosophy are the feminist standpoint theory of Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway’s ‘situated knowledges.’ Feminist standpoint theory operates from the point of departure that all knowledge is socially situated, even if it is presented as transcending specific contexts. In a similar vein, Donna Haraway (1988) argues that knowledge or truth is generally thought of as a disembodied point of view, therefore a neutral, point of view that transcends particularity and context and envelops an external and objective perspective. She argues that this point of view is reserved for majority persons in society (white, middleclass men), whose positions are regarded to be ‘neutral’ and whose bodies are therefore ‘unmarked’. ‘Marked bodies’ in contrast, are the bodies of gender, ethnic, social, cultural, racial minorities that are regarded as being less neutral and unable to transcend the particularity of their embodied situatedness, therefore unable to produce objective knowledge or truth. Haraway develops the concept of ‘situated knowledge’ which is knowledge that is situated in context. She argues for an epistemology of ‘location, positioning, and situating’ where partiality, rather than universality is a condition for making rational knowledge claims (Haraway 1988:589). Therefore, also from a Western feminist perspective Oyěwùmí’s reliance on ethnographical research about the life-world that she is writing from, strengthens, rather than disqualifies her philosophical claims, even if her ethnographical interpretations are not all accepted as established truths.

*Corporeal Feminism* (1994) to counter the dualist logic of Western Cartesian metaphysics in terms of which the body has

generally remained mired in presumptions regarding its naturalness, its fundamentally biological and pre-cultural status, its immunity to cultural, social and historical factors, its brute status as given, unchangeable, inert and passive, manipulable under scientifically regulated conditions (Grosz 1994:x).

The most obvious problem with the distinction between sex and gender that she identifies is, then, that in terms of the distinction, the body is regarded as completely natural, pre-cultural and a-historical, thus ignoring the fact that bodies are 'not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself' (Grosz 1994:x). Grosz evokes the logic of the model of the Möbius Strip, a three dimensional, inverted figure eight, the surface of which defies a clear distinction between inside and outside, in order to reconceptualise the distinction between body and mind. In this regard she explains that 'bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds or attributes of a single substance, but [...] through twisting [...] one side becomes another' (Grosz 1994:xii). Regarding the sex/gender distinction, the argument is thus that the body is always shaped by and interpreted in terms of social and cultural contexts, while these constructs are, in turn, influenced by the body, so that the nature/culture dichotomy is rendered superficial. Making a sharp sex/gender distinction then is dangerous in so far as it leads to an understanding of the body as completely natural and implies a naturalisation of certain cultural attitudes and constructs. Also Judith Butler has worked to show in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that sex is just as culturally constructed as gender. Butler asks: '[a]nd what is "sex" anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such "facts" for us?' (Butler 1990: 10). She suggests that sex is as culturally constructed as gender in so far as the scientific discourses that determine what is purely 'natural' are also culturally determined: 'the ostensibly natural facts of sex [are] discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests' (Butler 1990: 10). In this sense sex is already gender, or a gendered category, so that the distinction falls away (Butler 1990: 11). She writes:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts (Butler 1990: 10).

Butler's point is therefore that there is no distinction between gender as a cultural construct and sex as a natural given in so far as what we accept as natural and precultural or prediscursive is determined by culture and is therefore already gendered. The work of scholars like Butler and Grosz led to the falling away of the sex/gender distinction in feminist scholarship of today.

To further complicate the matter, Irigaray makes use of neither the term ‘sex’ nor ‘gender’, but ‘sexual difference.’ She writes that ‘[s]exual difference cannot [...] be reduced to a simple, extralinguistic fact of nature,’ rather ‘[i]t conditions language and is conditioned by it’ (Irigaray 1993b:20). And as a result, she regards sexual difference to be ‘situated at the junction of nature and culture’ (Irigaray 1993b:20).<sup>19</sup> Alison Stone, an English feminist philosopher, explains that it is held that sexual difference captures something that sex and gender do not, namely ‘that as human beings we always live and experience our bodies as imbued with *meaning*, never as bare biological things’ (Stone 2007:112). As explained above, the term ‘sex’ is traditionally regarded to refer only to the biologically sexed body, and ‘gender’ is regarded to refer to a culturally constituted sexual identity. ‘Sexual difference’ refers then, firstly, to the cultural symbolisation of the difference between male and female, and secondly, to the difference in how men and women ‘live their bodies’ in the context of the cultural symbolisation thereof (Stone 2007:112). Accordingly, Irigaray’s references to sexual difference do not merely refer to the biological differences between male and female bodies, but also to the cultural interpretation of what these differences symbolise and represent (Stone 2007:120). Similarly, Dutch feminist philosopher Annemie Halsema explains that sexual difference in Irigaray’s work refers to ‘body difference that is imbued with meaning in the symbolic order of language’ [my own translation] (Halsema 1998:18). Sexual difference thus implies a symbolically mediated bodily difference (Halsema 1998:18).

In contrast to these positions in Western feminist scholarship, it will be seen that in her work Oyěwùmí separates anatomical sex from gender. She argues that anatomical sex did not translate into masculine or feminine identity in precolonial Yorùbá society. In her work she therefore acknowledges the existence of sex in precolonial Yorùbá society, but not gender. She thus maintains a sharp distinction between these categories that have merged in Western feminist philosophy, as seen above. She writes for example:

[...] since in Western constructions, physical bodies are always social bodies, there is really no distinction between sex and gender. In Yorùbá society, in contrast, social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts, not from biology. The bare biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they must. Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market (Oyěwùmí 1997: 12).

She therefore argues that in precolonial Yorùbá society anatomical sex was not connected to social or cultural categories at all. Moreover, she gives a very specific meaning to the term ‘gender’ in her work. For her ‘[g]ender by definition is a binary, the categories often defined in opposition to each other’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 52) or ‘a construction of two categories in hierarchical relation to each other’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:39). She argues this hierarchical relation between the categories of man and woman to characterise Western culture and to be the point of departure for Western

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<sup>19</sup> In her later work (see for example *Luce Irigaray Key Writings* [2004]). Irigaray also starts using the term ‘sexuate difference.’ She seems to use ‘sexuate difference’ when she wants to claim that something is different for men and women, for example when she argues for sexually specific civil rights. It is arguably a way for her to indicate aspects of being a sexed subject and difference between the sexes, without evoking the association of sex (as the term ‘sexual’ often seems to do) (see *Conversations* [2008]). However, ‘sexual difference’ remains the term central to her overarching project and accordingly this is the term that I will use in this dissertation.

feminism. I analyse her position in detail in Chapter One and throughout the dissertation, so what she means here will become clearer. I also set out the relation that I see between the work of Oyěwùmí and Irigaray in detail in Chapter Four and elaborate on it in Chapter Five. There it will be seen that what Oyěwùmí understands as ‘gender’ (namely two hierarchical, dichotomous categories in which the feminine is inherently inferior) and denies to have existed in precolonial Yorùbá society, is exactly what Irigaray refers to when she asserts that sexual difference is *absent* in the Western symbolic order.<sup>20</sup>

I do not choose for one specific way to use the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in the dissertation. Because Oyěwùmí’s approach is so unique, and because I also work with Irigaray who works with the alternative concept of sexual difference, it is not possible to use these terms in one consistent way throughout the dissertation. The point of this terminological explication is therefore not to fix one final definition of these terms, but to alert the reader to the different ways these terms are used by the different scholars.

*b) Colonial/modern gender system, Africa, the West and other terms*

I use Argentinian feminist philosopher Maria Lugones’s term ‘colonial/modern gender system’ to refer to the gender system imposed on precolonial African societies by colonialism, but which are also sustained in the postcolonial African and Western societies of today. Lugones (2007) uses the term to refer to the gender system in which gender is defined as a dyad and in which man is woman’s superior – a system that dates back to colonial modernity, but is still in place in the global, Eurocentred capitalist order of today. In this dissertation I therefore use the term to connote the gender system against which Oyěwùmí is asserting an alternative precolonial Yorùbá reality, in other words, the gender system in place in the West, but also in colonial and postcolonial Yorùbá society. I also understand this to be the gender system that Irigaray is criticising when she is criticising the patriarchy of the Western symbolic order. These points will become clearer in Chapter Three.

I use the terms ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ in this dissertation to refer for instance to African cultures, African feminism and the colonisation and decolonisation of Africa. I am aware of the fact that African identities are inventions (see Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe’s book *The Invention of Africa* [1988]) and that the continent is vast and

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<sup>20</sup> Oyěwùmí herself does not situate her understanding of sex and gender within the Western feminist debates about the culturally constructed nature of bodies. It is therefore not always clear exactly what the implications of her use of these terms are and how it relates to the way in which these terms are used in Western feminist contexts. She could therefore possibly be criticised for following a too simplistic approach to the issue. However, here it is important to keep in mind that she is explicitly positioning herself outside of Western feminist discourses. She is therefore arguably not concerned with the question of how her use of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ would fit into or relate to the debate in Western feminism. Although her approach could be argued to show some overlaps with those of certain Western scholars (like Irigaray and Butler for instance), it is not possible or useful to equate her approach with such approaches since she is writing in a different register. She is trying to show how the assumption at the heart of Western feminism, namely that ‘woman’ exists universally (regardless of which Western feminist approach one follows to understand the notion of ‘woman’), erases or distorts Yorùbá (and possibly also other African) realities. For present purposes I want to make the point that she uses the term ‘gender’ in a critical way, and in a different way than is prevalent in Western feminism. She also conceptualises the relation between sex and gender differently and her approach to these terms does not translate directly into any specific Western feminist approach.

complex so that the term ‘African’ refers to so much that it ends up not meaning much. By using the terms ‘Africa’ or ‘African’ I am not trying to explicate cultural or any other kind of unity. Where it works semantically I use plurals when using these terms (for example, African cultures and societies, African knowledges and African identities) in order to indicate an awareness of plurality and diversity in my use of the term ‘Africa(n)’. In section IV of Chapter One of this dissertation I discuss in detail the way in which both Oyěwùmí and I often talk of ‘Africa’ and the ‘West’ in opposing terms.

Importantly, I am not referring to ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ rather than ‘Africa’ even though this is often done in order to exclude North Africa from Africa ‘proper’ due to its connections to the Arab world. Zimbabwean historian Paul Zeleza convincingly argues that conflating Africa with ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ constitutes a racialised view of Africa that rests on German philosopher Hegel’s racist mapping of Africa (1982) in which he distinguishes between ‘black Africa’ as the real Africa that is ‘enveloped in the dark mantle of night’ from North Africa which has extra-continental connections (Zeleza 2006:15). On this basis I refer to ‘Africa(n)’ rather than ‘sub-Saharan Africa(n).’

I do, however, refer to sub-Saharan African *philosophy*. I do this, because I work mostly with the tradition of African philosophy that centres the theme of relationality, which is a distinguishing characteristic of the work of many sub-Saharan philosophers. More generally, the meaning of the term ‘African philosophy’ has been subject to much debate. Scholars differ about whether something falls in the category of African philosophy only if it focuses on African themes, or whether any philosophy done by an African person qualifies as African philosophy.<sup>21</sup> In this thesis I engage mostly with the body of philosophy and philosophical discussions generated by philosophers from sub-Saharan Africa, who root their thought in sub-Saharan African cultures and worldviews (which are often argued to be underpinned by a relational metaphysics or communality, discussed in detail in Chapter Two).

Just as problematic as the term ‘Africa(n)’ are the terms ‘the West’ and ‘Western.’ British Scholar Glynis Cousin (2011:586) explains that the concept is firstly criticised for spawning ‘imagined’ insularities of the West and the non-West; secondly it is ‘a boastful concept with delusions of grandeur about what can be claimed as “western” while many things that are regarded to be ‘Western’ come from many other places and traditions,<sup>22</sup> and thirdly, it repeats the sins of the imperial past through a “return” of knowledge that locks cultures and communities in a single place and time. On this basis scholars like Cousin advocate for the rejection of this term. However, despite my awareness of the problematic nature of this term, I make use of it in this dissertation because Oyěwùmí, Irigaray and many of the other scholars that I am working with, rely on it in their arguments. In section IV of Chapter One I defend Oyěwùmí’s use of the concept.

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<sup>21</sup> For indepth discussions of this debate, refer to the sources mentioned in footnote 12: Hountondji (1971), Bodunrin (1979), Gyekye (1997), Masolo (1994), Mudimbe (1982), Owomoyela (1987) and Yai (1977).

<sup>22</sup> See for example Bernal 1987, Bhabra 2009 and Brotton 2003.

I am also aware of the fact that referring to ‘Western feminism’ or ‘Western feminist philosophy’ leads to great generalisations. Throughout the text I include footnotes to show that I am aware of the voices in Western feminist thought that contradict the points that Oyěwùmí and I are making about Western feminism. However, even though there are always dissident voices to refer to, Oyěwùmí’s criticism of Western feminism refers to aspects that are common and prevalent in the feminist thought generated by mainstream European and Anglo-American feminist scholars. The primary example in the work of Oyěwùmí is the assumption that gender is a universal concept: although there are scholars who offer alternative ideas, like Butler for example, and even though the primary focus upon gender is contested by black African-American feminists, it remains a characteristic of the works of most mainstream European and Anglo-American feminist scholars that they subscribe to the idea that ‘woman’ and ‘man’ exist everywhere. Accordingly, on the basis of examples such as this it can be argued that, although Oyěwùmí’s (and then also my own) use of the terms ‘Western feminism’ or ‘Western feminist philosophy’ leads to generalisations, it remains meaningful as a way of highlighting overarching problems in the dominant discourses of feminist thought as developed from within Western contexts and paradigms.

I use the term ‘coloniality’ to refer to the patterns of power that emerged from colonialism and that continue to shape all dimensions of life in the former colonies today, despite the formal ending of colonialism. This term will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Oyěwùmí prefers the term ‘worldsense’ to the term ‘worldview.’ She argues that the term ‘worldview’ is Eurocentric in so far as it reflects the Western privileging of the visual above all other senses (Oyěwùmí 1997:3). She argues that in contrast to this, the Yorùbá people privilege hearing in their approach to the world (I explain this in more detail in Chapter One). Accordingly, the term ‘worldsense’ is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups who might prioritise another sense above the visual (Oyěwùmí 1997:3).

Lastly, when I refer to metaphysics, I understand it in its broadest sense, meaning the fundamental understanding of the nature of being and the world that encompasses also ontology, epistemology and cosmology and questions of identity and religion. I thus use it as an overarching term for the most basic assumptions underlying worldviews, philosophy or society.

## **VIII Summary of chapters**

In Chapter One, ‘Gender and difference in the work of Oyěwùmí’, I start my philosophical reading of Oyěwùmí’s work by providing a detailed overview of her main arguments and by offering a critical discussion of her position. I also defend Oyěwùmí against critics who argue that she essentialises Yorùbá society by presenting it as an object apart from the world. I argue that her insistence on Yorùbá *difference* is necessary for the Yorùbá world to emerge as a world in its own right, rather than being reduced to an insignificant subplot of Western history.

In Chapter Two, ‘Oyěwùmí and the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought’, I relate Oyěwùmí’s work to the sub-Saharan tradition of African philosophy. I argue specifically that the work of Oyěwùmí could be read to share core metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition, even though she does not state this explicitly. Reading Oyěwùmí’s work as sharing certain central metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan philosophers working on relationality in sub-Saharan African societies makes it possible to develop Oyěwùmí’s thought in dialogue with this tradition and yields new insights on her position. It highlights that her rejection of gender as indigenous Yorùbá category has to do with her understanding of how the subject and the world are constructed. However, I also show how Oyěwùmí’s theory poses a powerful challenge to the implicitly masculine subject as it features in sub-Saharan African philosophy by highlighting the way in which it is in contradiction with the relational and non-dichotomous construction of the subject that is prominent in this tradition.

In Chapter Three, ‘African feminism as decolonising force’, I make the central argument of this dissertation, namely that African feminist philosophy has the potential to be a key decolonising force in African societies of today. I argue that the work of Oyěwùmí highlights how the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system on the Yorùbá society played a central role in the workings of colonial power. She shows how gender is not just one of the areas of life affected by colonialism, but that colonial power operated and effected its domination through the imposition of certain constructions of gender just as it operated through the imposition of certain constructions of race. The implication of her arguments is that transforming the gender systems in African societies is a crucial step in decolonising these societies and that African feminism thus has an important role to play in the process of decolonisation of Africa.

In Chapter Four, ‘Irigaray and Oyěwùmí in dialogue about the sacrificial metaphysics of the Western symbolic order’, I ask what a dialogue between Oyěwùmí and Irigaray can produce. I explore in more detail and through the lens of the work of Luce Irigaray the charges leveled by Oyěwùmí against Western society and thought and the gender dynamics that flow therefrom. Irigaray’s in depth analysis from a Western feminist perspective supports the claims of Oyěwùmí and deepens our understanding of her criticism of the colonial/modern gender system. Moreover, reading Irigaray next to Oyěwùmí also strengthens and enhances the connection that Oyěwùmí draws between the relational worldviews of precolonial Yorùbá society and the gender equivalence that she argues to have characterised that society. However, I also show Oyěwùmí is sometimes more radical than Irigaray, or goes further than Irigaray, in ways that highlight certain limitations and blind spots in Irigaray’s work.

In Chapter Five, ‘Motherhood’, I explore the theme of motherhood in the work of Oyěwùmí in light of the arguments that I made in the previous chapters. I show how in the work of Oyěwùmí the mother is a figure through which the dichotomies central to the colonial/modern gender system and dominant Western thought (body/mind, immanence/transcendence, nature/culture etc.) are deconstructed in striking and powerful ways. I interpret and theorise Oyěwùmí’s understanding of motherhood against the backdrop of sub-Saharan philosophy on relationality and in dialogue with Irigaray to show that it is a powerful notion that poses a challenge to Western feminism, to sub-Saharan African philosophy, to oppressive constructions of motherhood in African cultures, and that it is a concept that has the potential to contribute to the struggle of decolonisation in African societies.

In the Conclusion I draw together the different lines of argumentation and highlight the ways in which Oyěwùmí's arguments work to cause epistemic rupture in the discourses of Western feminism, African philosophy and the discussions around decolonisation.



## CHAPTER ONE

# GENDER AND DIFFERENCE IN THE WORK OF OYĚWÙMÍ

## I Introduction

In this chapter I present an overview of the ideas central to Oyěwù mí's argument that woman did not exist in precolonial Yorùbá society. I also situate her thinking within the discussion about the representation of Africa in relation to the West. A point that I highlight from the beginning is that Oyěwù mí is first and foremost making an epistemological argument. In her research on the Yorùbá, Oyěwù mí tries to show to what extent colonisation and coloniality 'marginalize[...] local epistemes' (Oyěwù mí 2016: 1). She argues that by researching the Yorùbá through a Western conceptual lens, scholars erase the Yorùbá reality in the process of knowledge production. By relying on certain categories (like gender) in our research on the Yorùbá, these categories are created in the knowledge that is produced about the Yorùbá, even if they are absent in the local setting. Thereby the Yorùbá world is reduced to an inferior version of the modern Western world rather than being presented as a world that is different from West and equivalent to the modern Western world. Oyěwù mí tries to resist this erasure of the Yorùbá reality by rooting her knowledge claims in 'endogenous categories and epistemologies' and by building her work on indigenous concepts, ideas and language rather than merely applying existing concepts and knowledge to the Yorùbá context (Oyěwù mí 2016: 1).

Oyěwù mí argues that if one succeeds in bracketing Western paradigms, conceptual frameworks and assumptions when researching precolonial Yorùbá society, it becomes clear that this society did not understand and organise the world in terms of gender categories. The gender organisation that one sees among the Yorùbá people today is the result of the imposition of a 'gender-saturated colonial epistemology' (Oyěwù mí 2016: 2). Oyěwù mí shows through a detailed analysis of family organisation, language, division of labour, religion and oral traditions that, unlike in the West, gender was not originally part of the Yorùbá conceptual framework for making sense of the social world. She argues that British colonisation as racial *and* gendered process was instrumental in the establishment of the existing gender systems among the Yorùbá. It will be seen that Oyewumj argues that the continued Western hegemony in knowledge production in terms of which the Western construction of gender is universalised and applied as invisible frame in research on all societies, sustains and reinforces the idea that gender exists as a timeless organising principle in precolonial Yorùbá society.

Oyěwù mí understands gender in the Western colonial/modern gender system to be a static hierarchical dichotomy in terms of which the feminine is the passive, material, private, inferior and opposite to the active, rational, public masculine. I read Oyěwù mí's rejection of gender to be rooted in the idea that this way of fixing identity is irreconcilable with the fluid and relational world of precolonial Yorùbá society where subjectivity was constituted in fluid and dynamic familial and societal relations. Accordingly I interpret Oyěwù mí to argue that gender did not exist in precolonial Yorùbá society, because human subjectivity-in-relation was not reducible to one 'side' of such a rigid and dichotomous divide. Importantly, in this chapter I simply provide an overview of Oyěwù mí's arguments in order to acquaint the reader with her work. In the next chapter I will be exploring her ideas more deeply.

Oyěwùmí is criticised convincingly by Nigerian feminist scholar Bibi Bakare-Yusuf for rooting her arguments in a rigid and superficial opposition between precolonial Yorùbá society and the West, thereby reducing both sides of this divide to ossified, essentialised and homogenous units in a way that ignores the internal difference and multiplicity of these realities and the dynamic ways in which they have been interacting and shaping each other for centuries. In this chapter, I show how Bakare-Yusuf's arguments are comparable to those of scholars like Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall and Paulin Hountondji who argue that a rigid oppositional understanding between Africa and the West serves colonialism and coloniality in so far as it reduces Africa to the mute Other of the West. However, I will defend Oyěwùmí's approach against this critique by showing how she works to show how Yorùbá realities are erased in the colonial/modern linear account of history in terms of which the West represents progress, civilization and modernity, while non-Western realities are construed as pre-modern or primitive. A striking and famous example of this is Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1892) in which he depicts Africans as children in the forest, unaffected by the movement of history. I argue that Oyěwùmí's insistence on Yorùbá *difference* is necessary for the Yorùbá world to emerge as a world in its own right that can, in Bakare-Yusuf's terms, be a world engaging and interacting on equal footing with other worlds. In other words, I see Oyěwùmí's insistence on Yorùbá difference to work in a decolonising way in so far as it opens a space for the emergence of a Yorùbá reality exterior to or at least distinct from the modern Western colonial world, but equivalent thereto (rather than simply being an inferior or less developed version of this world).

The section following this introduction provides some information on the Nigerian and Yorùbá contexts that Oyěwùmí is writing about. In section three I outline the main themes in her work. Section four explores the issue of Oyěwùmí's oppositional understanding between precolonial Yorùbá society and the West.

## **II Some introductory remarks on the Nigerian and Yorùbá contexts**

Nigeria is a country in West Africa, roughly three times the size of the United Kingdom. Nigeria's large population is very diverse and consists of over two hundred different ethno-linguistic groups (Falola and Heaton 2008:4). The three main ethnic groups are the Hausa, located in the northern savannas (accounting for roughly twenty one percent of the population), the Yorùbá, in the southwestern part of the country (roughly twenty percent of the population) and the Igbo of the southeast (roughly seventeen percent) (Falola and Heaton 2008:4). Although two hundred and fifty different indigenous languages are spoken in Nigeria, English has been the official language of the country since 1960 (Falola and Heaton 2008:4). There are also many different religions, but the majority of Nigerians identify either with Islam or Christianity. Prominent Nigerian historians Toyin Falola and Michael Heaton explain that culturally Nigerians are influenced both by their indigenous traditions and by the values and lifestyles that have been incorporated from the West (Falola and Heaton 2008:6). Traditional forms of entertainment, including indigenous musical styles such as juju and palm-wine music, the telling of stories ('moonlight tales') and theatrical performances coexist with television, movies and other technological forms of entertainment (Falola and Heaton 2008:6). Nigeria's big home-grown movie industry, known as Nollywood, blends Western influences with Nigerian contexts (Falola and Heaton 2008:6). The wildly popular Afrobeat music consists of a mix of traditional forms of music with American jazz and funk (Falola

and Heaton 2008:6). Hip hop is also growing in popularity (Falola and Heaton 2008:6). Falola and Heaton take this hybrid music scene as an indication of Nigerian's capacity to incorporate Western ideas and styles while retaining a strong foundation in indigenous traditions (Falola and Heaton 2008:6).

Nigeria was brought under colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The borders of the modern state of Nigeria were established in 1914 when the British colonial government amalgamated the northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria to form a unified colonial state (Falola and Heaton 2008:6). The northern and southern protectorates were themselves creations of British colonial administration – prior to colonial rule the diverse societies of the Nigerian region had ruled themselves as independent states (Falola and Heaton 2008:6). Colonial rule brought hundreds of autonomous independent groups of people together under the single administrative umbrella of an amalgamated Nigeria. The local political institutions were adapted to meet the needs of the British (Falola and Heaton 2008:7). Under a system of 'indirect rule' the British governed through indigenous political institutions (Falola 2008:7). Local chiefs were allowed to maintain their local authority while submitting themselves to the authority of a central apparatus of British colonial administrators (Falola and Heaton 2008:7). Falola and Heaton write that the system of indirect rule resulted in changes in the powers of traditional political leaders in so far as the British often misunderstood and abused the traditional political institutions through which they governed and they took away the sovereignty that local rulers had enjoyed previously (Falola and Heaton 2008:7). Falola and Genova, an American historian working on Nigerian history, write that the impact of indirect rule on the chieftaincy structures of Nigeria was profound in so far as legitimate chiefs were often disposed and replaced by those willing to work with the colonial administration (Falola and Genova 2006:16). The relationship between the chiefs and their people became strained and the structure of the kingdoms and towns changed (Falola and Genova 2006:16). Laws promulgated in this system often went against traditional notions of property rights and social contract (Falola and Genova 2006: 16). Nigeria became formally independent in 1960 and plunged into civil war from 1967 to 1970. After decades of war, political unrest and periods of military rule, Nigeria achieved a stable democracy in 1999 after free and fair democratic elections were held. In 2015 Nigeria overtook South Africa to become Africa's largest economy.

Oyěwùmí focuses her research specifically on the Yorùbá people of Nigeria. The Yorùbá people is an ethnic group that constitutes over forty million people in total. They live in a cultural region called Yorùbáland in southwestern and north central Nigeria and Southern and Central Benin. The majority of the Yorùbá population is from Nigeria and the majority of Yorùbá people speak the Yorùbá language. They also share a belief in a specific origin myth (See Falola and Genova 2006: 1-2). The Yorùbá is not one unified nation but consists of various different subgroups spread over various towns and cities, historically taking the form of different kingdoms. Falola and Heaton write that despite the multiplicity and complexity of the various kingdoms it is possible to talk of Yorùbá kinship, religion, politics or economy either as 'generalized phenomenon or even as a sketch' (Falola and Heaton 2006: 36). The standard Yorùbá language has become widespread, which had, to a certain extent, a homogenising effect on the culture so that there is something like an overarching 'Yorùbá culture' (Falola and Heaton 2006: 36). Interestingly, Yorùbá historian Anthony Asiwaju writes that 'there is perhaps no other single African people who have commanded so much attention as the Yorùbá' (Asiwaju 1983: 26). Falola and Genova explain that '[s]tudied because of their artistic intelligence, military

prowess, cultural adaptability, ability to manage modernization processes, and the crucial role of their educated elite, the Yorùbá have earned their place in the academic spotlight' (Falola and Genova 2006: 22). Falola and Genova write further that 'Yorùbá culture represents a leading example of the African influence in the New World'<sup>23</sup> (Falola and Genova 2006: 3). Many Yorùbá cultural practices have been brought to the New World by slaves during the transatlantic slave trade and today many people of African descent searching for an alternative to Western culture and a way of connecting to Africa have been looking to Yorùbá culture (Falola and Genova 2006: 3).

### **III Oyèwùmí and the colonial invention of woman in Yorùbá society**

Oyèwùmí famously argues that gender was created in Yorùbá society through the intertwined processes of colonial rule in Nigeria, the translation of Yorùbá into English and the continued dominance of Western knowledge production. Accordingly, gender was not an organising principle in precolonial Yorùbá society and 'woman' as a social category did not exist. At the beginning of *Invention of Women* Oyèwùmí makes it clear that her book is therefore not about the 'woman question' because the 'woman question' is an imported issue (and a specifically Western concept) that is not indigenous to the Yorùbá people (Oyèwùmí 1997: ix). Oyèwùmí is interested in how 'woman' came to exist in Yorùbá society and what the implications of this are. On this basis she refers to her approach as an epistemological one. She describes her aim in *The Invention of Women* as follows:

This book is about the epistemological shift occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on Yorùbá discourse. Since there is a clear epistemological foundation to cultural knowledge, the first task of the study is to understand the epistemological basis of both Yorùbá and Western cultures. This endeavor is best described as archaeological, in that it is concerned with revealing the most basic but hidden assumptions, making explicit what has been merely implicit, and unearthing the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying research concepts and theories (Oyèwùmí 1997:ix).

She is thus interested in what underlies knowledge of gender and specifically gender in the Yorùbá society. She suggests that the difference between gender relations in Yorùbá society and in Western society is not merely a superficial one, but one that concerns the very foundations of knowledge and the way in which the world as a whole is approached. In other words, she is not merely concerned with differences in Western and African approaches and understandings of gender, but with the most basic assumptions underlying these differences. Her project therefore entails firstly, unearthing the traces of a precolonial culture buried under colonial policies and practices and unceasing Western dominance in knowledge production; and secondly, revealing the hidden assumptions and ideas underpinning the Western understanding of gender relations.

She argues that many researchers who had written about gender in Yorùbá culture before her (and who had in their analyses assumed the existence of gender in indigenous Yorùbá culture and society) never did a systematic analysis of

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<sup>23</sup> This term refers to the Americas during the time of first exploration and colonisation by Europeans.

the local kinship categories, family organisation and social groups and therefore ‘indigenous categories and experiences did not seem to drive their work’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 2). She writes ‘[f]rom the perspective of knowledge making, Yorùbá categories of knowledge – the ways in which the culture codified and organized information – tended in the main not to influence scholarly claims and conclusions’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 2). She makes the point that it is a great challenge to write about an endogenous African epistemology because the theoretical categories we have at our disposal to analyse society are usually derived from Western social sciences and are rooted in a eurocentered culture (Oyěwùmí 2016: 57).

*a) Oyěwùmí’s critique of the colonial/modern gender system*

In contrast to the way in which Western feminists have criticised the fact that the body is ignored in Western thought, Oyěwùmí regards the body to be central to Western thought and culture. Oyěwùmí articulates the main difference between the indigenous Yorùbá and Western approaches to gender through the term ‘bio-logic’ or ‘body reasoning’ which refers to the idea that ‘in Western societies, physical bodies are *always* social bodies’ (Oyěwùmí 1997: xii). By that she means that societal hierarchies and structures are formed with reference to the kinds of bodies present so that biology equals social destiny. The kind of body a person has, determines her place and roles in society. She writes:

The idea that biology is destiny - or, better still, destiny is biology - has been a staple of Western thought for centuries. Whether the issue is who is who in Aristotle’s polis or who is poor in the late twentieth-century United States, the notion that difference and hierarchy in society are biologically determined continues to enjoy credence even among social scientists who purport to explain human society in other than genetic terms. In the West, biological explanations appear to be especially privileged over other ways of explaining differences of gender, race, or class (Oyěwùmí 1997:1) [footnote omitted].

Her argument is therefore, that in Western thought and society a person’s biology determines a person’s social position and status, so that bodily differences are used to set up social hierarchies. Bodily differences constitute the primary basis for social organisation. She argues that the reason that ‘the body has so much presence in the West’ has to do with the primacy accorded to sight, in comparison to the other senses (Oyěwùmí 1997:2). She writes that ‘[t]he differentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size is a testament to the powers attributed to “seeing”’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:2). Oyěwùmí uses Evelyn Fox Keller and Chrisine Grontkowski to briefly make the argument that there is a connection between the privileging of vision and patriarchy and that the roots of Western thought in the visual have yielded a dominant male logic: ‘They link the distance that seeing entails to the concept of objectivity and the lack of engagement between the “I” and the subject, the Self and the Other’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:15). Perceiving the world primarily through sight thus allows for a great distance between the self and those encountered by the self. In other words, it is not necessary to engage directly, physically, or intimately with the other in order to make judgments about the other. These judgments made on the basis of seeing from a distance are regarded as objective and this gives it the status of ‘truth.’ Based on visual perception of bodily differences, self is understood in opposition to Other.

She points out that this centrality of the body in Western society is surprising if one considers the history of Western thought in which the body is understood to be a non-essential part of the essentially rational and disembodied subject (Oyěwùmí 1997:3). However, it makes sense if one understands that in the history of Western thought embodiment is reserved for the Other (Oyěwùmí 1997:3). She writes:

Paradoxically, in European thought, despite the fact that society was seen to be inhabited by bodies, only women were perceived to be embodied; men had no bodies - they were walking minds. Two social categories that emanated from this construction were the 'man of reason' (the thinker) and the 'woman of the body,' and they were oppositionally constructed (Oyěwùmí 1997:6).

According to this scheme, embodiment is reserved for women. Accordingly, (Western) men transcend the logic in terms of which their bodies determine their place in society, because the essence and worth of (Western) men are regarded paradoxically to lie outside their bodies. Oyěwùmí's criticism of the Western gender scheme thus hinges on the idea that the cartesian split between mind and body is gendered and used to fix the embodied feminine subject as negative or Other of the disembodied masculine subject. The gender duality of Western thought is for Oyěwùmí inevitably oppressive in so far as it is mapped onto a range of hierarchical dichotomies beginning with mind/body, but including also culture/nature, public/private etc. in terms of which the second and inferior terms are mapped onto the feminine, making of it the negative of the masculine who represents rational subjectivity. She writes that

Differences and hierarchy, then, are enshrined on bodies; and bodies enshrine differences and hierarchy. Hence, dualisms like nature/culture, public/private, and visible/invisible are variations on the theme of male/female bodies (Oyěwùmí 1997:7).

Oyěwùmí therefore objects to the way in which, in the Western colonial/modern gender system, masculinity and femininity are embedded in a scheme of hierarchical dichotomies. She also objects to the way in which the female body is encoded with a range of qualities and associations that are regarded as inferior to the 'opposite' qualities and associations with which male bodies are encoded. Her work suggests that having a female body in Western society automatically also means that you are regarded to be a private domestic being who represents the natural, who is invisible in public, who lacks rationality and who therefore does not qualify as a full blown subject.

Oyěwùmí also objects to what she perceives to be the essentialism of the Western gender scheme in terms of which women are regarded to have fixed properties that exhaustively define their being:

The upshot of this cultural logic is that men and women are perceived as essentially different creatures. Each category is defined by its own essence. [...] Consequently, whether women are in the labor room or in the boardroom, their essence is said to determine their behavior. In both arenas, then, women's behavior is by definition different from that of men (Oyěwùmí 1997:35).

The argument is thus that having a female body means inevitably representing the inferior side of the fixed gender dichotomy regardless of the actual actions, abilities, roles and behaviour of women. She holds that this body logic of the West, infused with a pejorative valuation of difference (from the assumed masculine norm) thus has the result that having a female body means being inherently and inevitably the Other or negative of man and subjected to him in all areas of life. Gender thus means for Oyěwù mí a Western construct which entails a fixed and constantly reinforced hierarchical and dimorphous dichotomy in which woman is the negative of man.<sup>24</sup>

*b) The absence of the gender dichotomy in precolonial Yorùbá society*

In contrast to the colonial/modern gender system, in pre-colonial Yorùbá society, Oyěwù mí claims, ‘body type was not the basis of social hierarchy’ and biology was not ‘the foundation for social ranking’ (Oyěwù mí 1997: xii). Bodily differences therefore did not translate directly into social and ontological hierarchies. As a result, prior to colonial contact with the West, women in Yorùbá society did not form a preexisting group characterised by shared interests, desires or social position (Oyěwù mí 1997:ix) because ‘the body [was] not always enlisted as the basis of social classification’ (Oyěwù mí 1997:13). In other words, she claims, having a certain kind of sexed body did not determine social positioning at all. The shared fact of having a female body therefore did not automatically lead to women forming one class and occupying the same positions. Persons were classified into social groups depending on the roles they took up in society and the kind of people they were, and these things were not determined by sexual body type. In this sense, in Yorùbá society you were not primarily a man or a woman, but rather a trader, hunter, cook, farmer or ruler - all these identities being equally accessible to all gendered subjects. Motherhood is the exception here in so far as only women can give birth. Oyěwù mí explains however, that this is only one area of life and although the capacity of women to give birth was taken very seriously and socially celebrated, it did not determine women’s position and roles across other spheres of society, such as restricting them to nurturing/domestic roles. Accordingly, although it is highly significant in Yorùbá society that the *obìnrin* (female) bears the baby, this does not in any way detract from her full and varied subject status (Oyěwù mí 1997:36). Moreover and crucially, motherhood was a role that had political, economic and social dimensions so that it was not the naturalised, private, domestic identity that it constitutes in Western patriarchy:

No single role defines *obìnrin* in Yorùbáland. If any role looms large, it is motherhood, not wifehood, but motherhood itself is not one thing; rather, it suggests a multiplicity of possibilities for social categorization (Oyěwù mí 1997:161).

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<sup>24</sup> Many Western feminists, like Simone De Beauvoir (1949), Luce Irigaray (1985a and throughout her work), Carol Pateman (1988), Julia Kristeva (throughout her work), to name a few, have criticised the way in which gender is constructed in Western society in the same way. However, Oyěwù mí does not claim allegiance with such Western feminists, because she argues that they assume this to be a universal problem and thereby contribute to the production of distorted knowledges about other cultures like that of the Yorùbá (Oyěwù mí 1997). Throughout her work Oyěwù mí argues that Western feminism (like Western thought in general) assumes hierarchy and dichotomy wherever it sees gender difference so that it is inherently unable to make sense of and inevitably distorts the multiplicity and fluidity of the gender dynamics of precolonial Yorùbá society.

Accordingly, although motherhood is a social role directly linked with the feminine sexual identity, it is not an essentialised identity that defines someone exhaustively. It is one role among many that a person can occupy at the same time. Moreover, as a role, it comprises many things and has political, economic, social and cultural aspects. I discuss this in detail in Chapter Five. For Oyěwù mí the classic example is that in Yorùbá society it would not be strange for a woman to occupy the roles of *oba* (ruler), *omo* (offspring), *iya* (mother) and *alawo* (diviner-priest) at the same time, ‘all in one body’ (Oyěwù mí 1997:14). She explains that none of these social categories are gender specific or exclusive of each other and that one cannot therefore place persons in Yorùbá social categories just by looking at their bodies or the functions of such bodies, such as pregnancy or lactation (Oyěwù mí 1997:14).

On this basis she writes that the words woman and man are mistranslations of the Yorùbá *obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* in so far as these words in Yorùbá do not refer to categories that are either binarily opposed or hierarchical (Oyěwù mí 1997:32). Unlike the words ‘(wo)man’ and ‘man’ that imply that there is an ‘original human type against which the other variety has to be measured,’ ‘rin’ the common suffix of *obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* implies a common humanity inherent to two different kinds of anatomies (Oyěwù mí 1997:33). Oyěwù mí writes:

In the Yorùbá conception, *òkùnrin* is not posited as the norm, the essence of humanity, against which *obìnrin* is the Other. Nor is *òkùnrin* a category of privilege. *Obìnrin* is not ranked in relation to *òkùnrin*; it does not have negative connotations of subordination and powerlessness, and, above all, it does not in and of itself constitute any social ranking (Oyěwù mí 1997:33).

Accordingly, Oyěwù mí posits a logic in terms of which gender is not understood within the dichotomy of one/Other in terms of which the masculine is the standard and the feminine is the Other. In terms of this logic gender also does not translate directly into social hierarchy. In her work Oyěwù mí replaces the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ with ‘anamale’ and ‘anafemale’ to refer to anatomical males and anatomical females without the hierarchical connotations. When writing about the sexual dynamics in Yorùbá society she thus tries to indicate sex and gender in a non-oppositional and non-antagonistic way in which man is not defined in opposition to his negative, woman. This becomes particularly clear when she writes that the Yorùbá term ‘*obìnrin*’ cannot mean the same as the English word ‘woman’ because women are

1. those that do not have a penis [...];
2. those who do not have power; and
3. those who cannot participate in the public arena (Oyěwù mí 1997:34).

*Obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* therefore exist within a gender scheme that allows for the anafemale to be simultaneously more than and different from the negative of anamale, in other words as an identity or subject position it transcends the space of Other as found in the hierarchical gender duality. Oyěwù mí therefore argues that *obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* express a



distinction between two types of anatomy which does not connote social privilege or disadvantage (Oyěwùmí 1997:34). She writes:

Unlike 'male' and 'female' in the West, the categories of *obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* are primarily categories of anatomy, suggesting no underlying assumptions about the personalities or psychologies deriving from such. Because they are not elaborated in relation and opposition to each other, they are not sexually dimorphic and therefore are not gendered. In the Old Oyo, they did not connote social ranking; nor did they express masculinity or femininity, because those categories did not exist in Yorùbá life or thought (Oyěwùmí 1997:34).

With 'sexual dimorphism' I read Oyěwùmí to refer to the way in which man and woman are defined in opposition to each other so that they are regarded to embody two different 'sides' of the human being (the implication of which, as seen earlier, is that woman is the negative of man). *Obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* are therefore full subjects on their own, and each can claim any role or characteristic (on any 'side' of the colonial/modern gender scheme). Having differently sexed bodies therefore did not imply being categorised on one side of a hierarchical dichotomy in which women are relegated to the private sphere and are responsible only for that which is regarded as material and natural, while men can lay claim to transcendence of the physical. Having differently sexed bodies did not determine which roles one could play in society and to which groups one could belong. Oyěwùmí writes that *obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* are terms that were not infused with gendered moral attributes: 'the female deity Oya is regarded as destructive and fearsome like Sango the thunder god because strength, authority, violence, and destruction are not stereotyped and attributed to only anamales' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 143). Oyěwùmí writes: 'Yorùbá genderlessness is not to be read as androgyny or ambiguity of gender. It is not genderless in terms of a presence of both male and female attributes. Instead it is genderless because human attributes are not gender-specific' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 143). Accordingly, Oyěwùmí's position is not that differences in sexed bodies were not acknowledged. In the spheres of sex and reproduction these differences were highly significant and that is why motherhood was regarded to be such an important role. However, differences in sexed bodies had no normative implications in society, it did not confine people with certain bodies to certain roles and positions and it did not translate into hierarchy. Moreover, human roles, characteristics and functions were not categorised in terms of gendered dichotomies.

Oyěwùmí qualifies her position as follows:

The assertion that 'woman' as a social category did not exist in Yorùbá communities should not be read as antimaterialist hermeneutics, a kind of poststructuralist deconstructing of the body into dissolution. Far from it - the body was (and still is) very corporeal in Yorùbá communities (Oyěwùmí 1997:x).

Oyěwùmí is therefore not rejecting the existence of differently sexed bodies. She argues that unlike in Western thought and society bodily differences did not translate into hierarchy in the precolonial Yorùbá culture. Central to her criticism of the Western approach to sexed bodies and sexual difference is then the assertion that in the West '[d]ifference is expressed as degeneration' or as 'a deviation from the original type' (Oyěwùmí 1997:1). This is because 'in the West,

women/females are the Other, being defined in antithesis to men/males, who represent the norm' (Oyěwùmí 1997:33). It is this symbolic construction of bodily differences that did not exist in Yorùbá society, it is not that these bodily differences themselves were regarded to be absent.

On this basis it could be argued that when Oyěwùmí so vehemently rejects the existence of gender in precolonial Yorùbá society, she rejects 'a construction of two categories in hierarchical relation to each other' (Oyěwùmí 1997:39) (based on the self/other distinction so central to Western metaphysics) and not difference between the sexes as such. Accordingly, two of the central ideas that Oyěwùmí challenges with the alternative logic that she is asserting, are firstly that '[t]here is an essential, universal category "woman" that is characterized by the social uniformity of its members' and secondly, that '[t]he category "woman" is precultural, fixed in historical time and cultural space in antithesis to another fixed category - "man."' (Oyěwùmí 1997:xii). Oyěwùmí thus sketches a vision of woman beyond what she regards as, the limited and static place in the hierarchical gender dichotomy of Western thought where woman is defined only as a negative to man. Oyěwùmí implies that in this scheme there is no space for woman to define herself and accordingly 'woman' designates a homogenous group with no space for internal differentiation. Oyěwùmí pronounces that 'it is a mistake to lump females together in a category called "women" based on their anatomy, as if their anatomy defined their social roles' (Oyěwùmí 1997: 160). The idea of woman that she holds forth is one where women like men can become and change and where they are not reducible to a flat and two dimensional category of wife and mother.

Oyěwùmí argues that instead of gender, seniority was the organising principle in Yorùbá society that determined access to power and social hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> Oyěwùmí describes the traditional Yorùbá family as non-gendered because kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated and power centers within the family are diffused and not gender-specific (Oyěwùmí 2002:5). The fundamental organising principle within the family is seniority and therefore kinship categories encode seniority and not gender (Oyěwùmí 2002:5). In other words, there would be terms for older siblings and younger siblings, but not for male and female siblings (Oyěwùmí 2002:5).<sup>26</sup> Unlike sex, seniority as organising principle is context dependent and shifting, as a result 'no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all

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<sup>25</sup> Seniority refers to chronological age difference and also to the positioning of persons within the lineage structure on the basis of whether they were born into the lineage structure or joined through marriage, and if the latter is the case, at what point they joined.

<sup>26</sup> For an in depth critique of this etymological approach of Oyěwùmí, see Bakare-Yusuf (2003a). For Bakare-Yusuf the danger of such etymological arguments is that they ultimately support an authenticist and organicist approach to language and culture in terms of which it is assumed that words have original meanings that can be accessed to tell us something about a pure culture untainted by external influences (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a: 127). In contrast Bakare-Yusuf holds both language and culture to be impure and hybrid from the outset (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a: 128). Accordingly, words and practices are in constant flux and mean many different things at the same time, so that one cannot claim to access original and pure meanings through them. Moreover, Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyěwùmí wrongly assumes that the meanings of words can completely capture social reality (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a: 128). According to Bakare-Yusuf this means that Oyěwùmí assumes that language simply reflects social reality rather than acknowledging that language is always caught up in social reality (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a: 128). Lastly, Bakare-Yusuf makes the point that Oyěwùmí fails to take seriously the interwoven nature of power relations, so that a principle like seniority is not monolithic or univocal but is woven together with other power relations like gender (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a: 134). As a result she simplifies social reality and the complex operation of power (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a: 135).

depends on who is present in any given situation' (Oyěwùmí 1997:42).<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, identity is fluid, relational, contextual and shifting in Yorùbá society. Oyěwùmí explains that seniority, unlike gender, is only comprehensible as part of relationships and accordingly it is not 'rigidly fixated on the body nor dichotomized' (Oyěwùmí 1997:42). Oyěwùmí thus interprets gender as it features in Western society and thought as an essentialist kind of organising principle which fixes power relations and confines certain categories of people (women being the main example) to limited roles and spaces, while seniority as organising principle supports much more dynamic, relational and fluid identities and power structures. Oyěwùmí writes:

Dominant Western gender categories and the hierarchies they represent did not exist in the original Youba seniority-based system. In the seniority-based arrangement, the human anatomy or genitalia does not express any distinct social or moral attributes. Thus the Yorùbá categories *òkùnrin* (usually translated as male/man/boy) and *obìnrin* (usually translated as woman/female/girl) represent mistranslation in that they introduce gender hierarchy where there was none (Oyěwùmí 2016:11).

Oyěwùmí thus posits a world in which bodily differences exist without implying hierarchy. In this order society is organised on the basis of the non-dichotomous and fluid concept of seniority. Identity is construed in plural and dynamic ways and gender does not translate into dichotomy or hierarchy. Woman, as a static being determined by her body, confined to certain positions in society and defined as the natural, passive, material negative to the category of man (to which culture, the active and the mind are attributed), does not exist.

*c) The family-as-lineage system of the Yorùbá versus the nuclear family system of modern Western society*

Oyěwùmí regards the family as an important context in which gender identities are defined in a society. She contrasts the family-as-lineage system of Yorùbá society with the nuclear family system of modern Western society and shows how these different models of family give rise to entirely different kinds of identities.

Oyěwùmí refers to the nuclear family of the colonial/modern gender system as a 'male-dominant institution' which is built on a subordinate wife, her patriarchal husband and their children (Oyěwùmí 2002: 3). Woman is reduced to wife in this model of family and confined to the private sphere (Oyěwùmí 2002: 4). Here it is relevant that in French the words for woman and wife are the same, both are referred as *femme*. Oyěwùmí argues that in the colonial/modern gender system the wife identity is 'totally defining' and other relationships are at best secondary (Oyěwùmí 2002: 4). She writes that '[Western] feminist discourse is rooted in the nuclear family and that this social organization constitutes the very grounds of feminist theory and a vehicle for the articulation of [its] values' (Oyěwùmí 2000:1093). The nuclear family is the source of many of the concepts that are used universally in gender research (Oyěwùmí 2002: 1). Accordingly, for Oyěwùmí, the woman at the heart of Western feminism is the severely limited and essentialised

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<sup>27</sup> Like Bakare-Yusuf, British anthropologist J.D.Y. Peel holds that Oyěwùmí jumps too quickly from an analysis of lexical terms to infer real attitudes in society (Peel 2002:138). Secondly, again like Bakare-Yusuf, Peel argues that Oyěwùmí overstates the importance of age and seniority in so far as it usually works as co-ordinate, rather than as an alternative to gender (Peel 2002:139).

category of wife. In other words, in feminist or gender research woman necessarily represents the private, the natural, the bodily and the passive while man can claim the other side of these binaries and be a fully-fledged subject in society.

Oyěwùmí argues that once the woman at the heart of Western feminist theory is exposed as wife, ‘the limitations of concepts such as gender and other terms in feminist scholarship become more intelligible’ (Oyěwùmí 2000: 1094). With this she means that such a limited understanding of woman is exposed as culturally and historically specific and not universal and the applicability of the concept ‘woman’ is thus limited from the outset. More specifically, this understanding of woman is not appropriate to the Yorùbá context at all, because the family within which subjects are defined, is completely different from the Western nuclear family. Oyěwùmí argues that the nuclear family which is built around the conjugal core of the heterosexual couple remains an alien form in Africa in which it is the lineage that is regarded as the family (Oyěwùmí 2002: 4). The family-as-lineage of the Yorùbá is non-gendered in so far as ‘power centres within the family are diffused and are not gender-specific’ (Oyěwùmí 2002: 5). The result is that relationships are fluid and situational and continuously placing individuals in shifting context-dependent hierarchical and non-hierarchical changing roles. As a result ‘African social categories are fluid [...], [t]hey do not rest on body type, and positioning is highly situational’ (Oyěwùmí 2002: 8). Oyěwùmí thus argues that modern Western thought produces and is in turn sustained by a model of family in which the husband and wife form one conjugal core or unit in which woman is a limited category, social position or identity, confined to the domestic and material space from where she supports and acts as negative for man as fully formed subject. In contrast, the family-as-lineage system of the Yorùbá consists of a complex network of relationships and power balances in which identity is fluid, relationally constituted and constantly shifting.

In her new book *What Gender is Motherhood?* she develops these themes with reference to the topic of motherhood. Central to Oyěwùmí’s work on motherhood is the argument that, unlike in Western cultures and thought, motherhood is not a gendered role or position. She argues that there is no masculine counterpart for *Iya* (mother) (Oyěwùmí 2016:52), in other words, *Iya* is a singular category that transcends the gender binary, that does not fit into one ‘side’ of humanity. As explained earlier in this chapter, Oyěwùmí understands gender to refer to ‘two hierarchically organized, binarily opposed categories in which the male is superior and dominant, and the female is subordinated and inferior’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:58). In the colonial/modern gender system ‘[t]he category mother is perceived to be embodied by women who are subordinated wives, weak, powerless, and relatively socially marginalized’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:58). The *Iya* of the Yorùbá does not fit into this category, or ‘did not derive from notions of gender’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:58). Oyěwùmí therefore presents motherhood as a category that strikingly reflects the ungenderedness of Yorùbá society which she described in more general terms in *Invention of Women*. Where motherhood is one of the concepts or roles in the colonial/modern gender system that is the most loaded with gendered meanings, or is a ‘paradigmatic gender category’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:7, it is ungendered in terms of indigenous Yorùbá thought and culture. I will look at this in the next chapter and explore it in detail in Chapter Five.

#### IV The relationship between Africa and the West in the work of Oyěwùmí

##### a) *The problem of the West versus Africa in the work of Oyěwùmí*

Central to Oyěwùmí's work is the idea of a pure precolonial Yorùbá society that existed completely independently and without any influence from the West. Her analyses are thus dependent on two oppositions: firstly, Africa in opposition to the West and secondly, a pristine precolonial Africa in opposition to a postcolonial Africa tainted by Western influence. On this basis her work is criticised for entailing a problematic essentialising of both sides of these dichotomies which ignores the ways in which both Africa and the West have been shaping each other for centuries so that there exists no pure divide between Africa and the West or between a pristine precolonial Africa and a Western influenced postcolonial Africa. In this section I first outline the criticism against Oyěwùmí and then I defend Oyěwùmí's claims as a strategic form of essentialism.

A long line of postcolonial scholars argue that the fiction of a strict divide between Africa and the West has been a preferred way through which the West constructed itself in opposition to mute 'others' as part of the colonial project. Stuart Hall, Jamaican born British cultural theorist, explains in this regard that the emergence of the West as an historical construct during the Enlightenment happened through banishing the figure of 'the other' to the edge of the conceptual world and constructing it as absolute opposite or negation of everything the West stood for (Hall 1992:314). The discourse of 'the West and the Rest' became the dominant way in which the West represented itself and its relation to 'the other' for many decades (Hall 1992:318). In terms of this paradigm the world is divided into a simple dichotomy in which the West is dependent on Africa as its mute other in order to sustain its self-identity and coherence. Similarly, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe explains that Africa still serves as 'one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity' (Mbembe 2001:2). In this sense 'Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity' (Mbembe 2001:3). Accordingly, the discourse in terms of which the West and Africa are understood in oppositional terms serves colonial and neocolonial oppression in so far as it reduces Africa to a negative foil for Western self-identity. In this way the multiplicity, movement and internal difference of the African continent is erased and Africa is reduced to a static, homogenous, silent 'outside.'

On this basis Mbembe and South African literary scholar Sarah Nuttall regard '[t]he obstinacy with which scholars (including African scholars) continue to describe Africa as an object *apart from the world* [...]' to be highly problematic (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004:348). It 'perpetually underplays the embeddedness in multiple elsewhere of which the continent actually speaks' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004:348). With this they refer to the way in which African ideas, things and people exist and have an impact far beyond the borders of the continent and inversely how the African continent is a place that contains and is shaped by people, things and ideas from all over the world. However, they argue that the dominant idea of Africa as it is represented in scholarship and popular culture is fraught because it is 'caught and imagined within a web of difference and absolute otherness' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004:348). As a sign it

ends up 'epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the abject, or the other-worldly' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004:348). In other words, Mbembe and Nuttall argue that looking to Africa for radical otherness is not only historically and empirically misguided, but also works to essentialise Africa and to banish it to the edges of the world and world history as opposite or other of the West so that that which is African, is overparticularised and loses all claims to global or universal relevance.

As a strategy to overturn the imaginings of Africa as mute and absolute other, Mbembe and Nuttall suggest that we could take seriously that 'Africa, like everywhere else, has its here, its elsewheres, and its interstices' and that it exists only as 'a function of circulation and of circuits' so that it is 'fundamentally in contact with an *elsewhere*' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 351). Their plea is thus to think of African in plural, impure (hybrid) and dynamic terms instead of understanding it as static and closed off. Mbembe conceptualises Africa in terms of the notion of 'worlds-in-movement,' which refers to the way in which people are moving in and out of Africa in perpetual movement in 'a history of colliding cultures' in so far as the continent is 'caught in the maelstrom of war, invasion, migration, intermarriage, a history of various religions we make our own, of techniques we exchange, and of goods we trade' (Mbembe 2007:27). Understood in this way, Africa is part of the world and the world is part of Africa in ways that undermine any attempt to draw a rigid divide between Africa and the West. This allows for a plural understanding of Africa in relation to the West as a strategy to resist coloniality.

Similarly, famous Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji writes the following about Africa as a dynamic and pluralist space:

Pluralism does not come to any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself (Hountondji 1976:165).

Hountondji thus explains very well why the idea of a pure (and idealised) precolonial Africa is a fiction: it freezes Africa outside of time and space and denies its internal multiplicity and movement. The point is thus that it does not make sense to fix a static notion of Africa and posit it in opposition to an equally static and homogenous notion of the West. Doing this serves first and foremost the colonial/modern discourse in which Africa is reduced to 'other' of the West.

In this light, it is problematic that Oyěwùmí relies heavily on a construct of a pure precolonial Africa in opposition to the West. The implication is that she not only disregards the way in which the West and Africa constitute each other, but also that she essentialises and fixes both sides of the dichotomy. Bakare-Yusuf offers in-depth criticism against Oyěwùmí specifically on this point, namely for essentialising Yorùbá culture through her rigid oppositional

understanding of Africa and the West. Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyěwùní's oppositional and rejectionist attitude towards influences from elsewhere is out of step with the pluralistic approach to knowledge found in many African cultures and also among the Yorùbá (Bakare-Yusuf 2003:122). Bakare-Yusuf convincingly accuses Oyěwùní of succumbing to the age-old 'will to truth' (in Nietzsche's words) which is a 'fundamental desire present in all Western metaphysics since Plato to uncover *the* truth' and constitutes 'a desire that must remain unconscious of the very assumption that motivates it' (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:128). Bakare-Yusuf writes that in positing an irreducible difference between the Yorùbá social system and Western systems Oyěwùní undercuts the differences that are already at play *within* Yorùbá society (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:132). Bakare-Yusuf uses the term 'polytheistic'<sup>28</sup> to describe the Yorùbá society. She explains that polytheism is not simply a plural relation to the spirit world, but a 'deeply inscribed theological imperative' that frames societal attitudes far beyond religious practice (Bakare-Yusuf 2003:136).<sup>29</sup> She writes that it 'potentially opens up a fluid and pragmatic attitude, not just towards gods, but towards all things, categories and concepts' (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:136). This confirms Falola and Heaton's point about how the Nigerian people are able to incorporate multiple worlds into their own, as discussed in section two of this chapter. Bakare-Yusuf writes:

[...] polytheism involves living with several different moral or truth claims and negotiating the tension that arises from sameness and difference without excluding one or the other. In this light, Yorùbá society more closely resembles the account of interrelational and multiplicitous power structures that post-modern theorists have provided. In a polytheistic society there is no dominant line of power that has a monopoly on truth - rather, there is a shifting constellation of forces of capability and restraint. Truth, under polytheism, does indeed resemble Nietzsche's mobile army of metaphors. At the level of discourse, no one interpretation can dominate; at the level of lived reality, enabling and constraining forces are always in contestation with each other (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:136).

Bakare-Yusuf therefore seems to agree with Oyěwùní regarding the fluid and relational nature of the Yorùbá subject and society. However she calls Oyěwùní on the way in which she posits a static, homogenous and pure precolonial Yorùbá culture which contradicts the multiplicity, fluidity and pluralism of the precolonial but also contemporary Yorùbá world. Bakare-Yusuf regards this to get lost when Oyěwùní posits one truth about a pristine Yorùbá culture and identity which excludes other truths and influences. Bakare-Yusuf writes that the Yorùbá context embraces 'bastardised and bastardising space' and invites intermixture which entails engaging in 'the practices of multitude' (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:137). This resonates strongly with Oyěwùní's description of Yorùbá society as fluid, dynamic,

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<sup>28</sup> Polytheism is the worship of or belief in multiple deities usually assembled into a pantheon of gods and goddesses, along with their own religions and rituals. The Yorùbá society, along with many other African societies, were polytheistic in precolonial times. Ebere explains that despite the fact that most Africans are either Christian or Muslim as a result of the forceful missionary encroachment on the African continent, African polytheistic traditional religion has survived in various forms of sub-Saharan Africa (Ebere 2011: 482). In these cases African people would then belief in the Christian or Muslim god along with their own gods.

<sup>29</sup> Ebere explains that whereas Westerns conceive of religion as an independent system of beliefs or organisational structure, 'to Africans religion is a complete way of life that is present in every sector of everyday cultural experiences and human interaction' (Ebere 2011: 482).

relational and devoid of rigid dichotomies. Bakare-Yusuf also sketches the precolonial Yorùbá world as one where things and people could be many things at the same time, a world where identity is not established through the exclusion of that which is other, but in relation thereto. However, Bakare-Yusuf argues that Oyěwùmí unconsciously adopted a ‘conceptual monotheism’ which marks ‘a refusal to open herself up to the mystery of alterity, of the contradictory pains and pleasures of a Yorùbá world of difference’ (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:138). Bakare-Yusuf’s point is therefore that Oyěwùmí’s insistence on the existence of a pure precolonial Yorùbá society without any influence from the West and the importance of creating ‘pure’ Yorùbá knowledge without relying on Western concepts and ideas contradicts the multiplicity and fluidity that she identifies in Yorùbá culture and thought. In other words, through her search for that which is ‘purely’ Yorùbá in clear distinction from that which is Western, she is going against the grain of the Yorùbá world sense itself and is thereby reducing it to something less than itself. In this sense, in so far as she is trying to exclude that which is other and trying to close off multiplicity, Oyěwùmí’s thesis had become ‘unwittingly Western’ (at least according to Oyěwùmí’s own understanding of what is Western) despite her stated desire to convey Yorùbá epistemology into scholarship (Bakare-Yusuf 2003a:138).

Bakare-Yusuf therefore shows very clearly how the rigid opposition between Africa and the West leads to a problematic essentialisation of African societies and cultures. The reverse is also true. Understanding Africa and the West in oppositional terms results in an equally static and homogenous understanding of the Western side of the divide. In the work of Oyěwùmí this problem arises clearly in the way in which she does not distinguish between different strands and schools of Western thought or of Western feminist thought. There is, for example, a whole tradition of Western feminist philosophy that raises the same criticism against Western society and thought as what Oyěwùmí is raising, namely criticising its inability to deal with difference other than ordering it into dichotomies and hierarchies.<sup>30</sup> However, if one reads Oyěwùmí one gets the impression that Western thought and Western feminist thought are entirely monolithic with no internal dissidence, difference or multiplicity.

Accordingly, the rigid oppositional understanding between Africa and the West that one sees in the work of Oyěwùmí is deeply problematic. It ignores the way in which both the West and Africa are constituted by a perpetual movement of people and ideas and works to essentialise and ossify both sides of the divide. Oyěwùmí can be criticised for showing no awareness of the problem.

#### *b) Oyěwùmí’s work as a response to the colonial erasure of African worlds*

However, while Oyěwùmí is criticised for constructing a pristine precolonial Yorùbá culture, she at the same time provides good reasons for asserting *difference* from the West and presenting the Yorùbá world as something that needs to be approached and analysed on its own terms. In contrast to the mentioned critical readers, I read Oyěwùmí’s work as a resistant response to the colonial erasure of African worlds, cultures and thought and the ways in which African

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<sup>30</sup> Notable here is the French stream of feminist philosophy called *écriture féminine* that emerged in the 1970s, and includes writers like Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf and Annie Leclerc, who all take as point of departure to their work that feminine difference is excluded from the Western fallocentric culture.



peoples bring value and meaning into the world. Her work suggests that African knowledges and realities are subsumed and erased by Western knowledges and realities because Western knowledges and realities are wrongly regarded to represent the universal. She is asserting Yorùbá difference in a way that pushes Western knowledges back, or in a way that ‘provincialises’<sup>31</sup> (Oyěwùmí 2016: 4) Western knowledges and through which the alternative realities and knowledges of the Yorùbá can be reimagined or reconstructed.

She writes that ‘in cross-cultural gender studies, theorists impose Western categories on non-Western cultures and then project such categories as natural’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:11). These Western categories erase the alternative constructions of non-Western and African societies (Oyěwùmí 1997:16). The example central to Oyěwùmí’s work is the way in which gender categories are created in Yorùbá societies. She writes in this regard that gender ‘is in the eye of the beholder’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:16). In this way a gender framework is inscribed conceptually into the social reality. Oyěwùmí explains that she learned about gender for the first time when she moved from Nigeria to the US to study at Berkeley. She returned to Nigeria to conduct the kind of gender research that she had learnt in America. She had Yorùbá people fill out questionnaires in which they answered questions like how many sons and daughters they had. However, when she decided to translate these questionnaires into Yorùbá, she realised that in the Yorùbá language it was impossible to ask the same questions as in the English, because in the Yorùbá language gender is not differentiated. Accordingly, she could not ask for example about sons and daughters, but only about children. Conducting the research in English therefore created these categories. In other words, by researching ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ in Yorùbá society and having people answer questions about their sons and daughters, categories that do not exist in society were carried into and structured the research. She argues that when working in a conceptual framework like that of gender and when dealing with the questions that arise within that framework, the frame itself becomes invisible, that we become enframed in it (Oyěwùmí 1997:13). In other words Oyěwùmí understands gender to be a specific Western conceptual frame that generates specific research results. However, this Western frame has become naturalised or normalised in a way that makes researchers blind to the fact that it influences their research outcomes. On this basis ‘Western theories become tools of hegemony as they are applied universally, on the assumption that Western experiences define the human’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:16). Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty captures Oyěwùmí’s point very well when he writes (in a different context and not specifically with reference to Oyěwùmí) that ‘[o]nly “Europe,” [...] is *theoretically* (that is, at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially “Europe”’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 8). Oyěwùmí argues that there is no possibility for the Yorùbá to offer an alternative theoretical framework in which to understand gender, as long as the empirical research done in the Yorùbá context is only ever used to confirm the dominant Western understanding of gender. The Yorùbá context is therefore never approached as something in its own terms that gives rise to its own distinct theoretical position. To do this, namely to generate a

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<sup>31</sup> This term comes from the book of postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty called *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000). The term refers to the process of deuniversalising European history by showing that it is the particular history of a particular place in a particular time.

distinct theoretical position from the empirical realities of Yorùbá society, is what she aims to do in her work.<sup>32</sup> Such a theoretical position or conceptual framework (which I further explore and develop in this dissertation) constitutes, in turn, a lens through which Oyěwùmí argues the Yorùbá reality should be approached and understood.

Oyěwùmí explains further that due to the hierarchical relationship between the West and Africa (or ‘the rest’) which is a hallmark of modernity, learning is unidirectional: ‘Africans must learn from Europeans and Americans (including their pathologies); Africans, on the other hand, are not perceived to have anything of value that they could teach the West’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 1). She writes also that ‘there is no room to imagine African women who can help themselves, or African cultures poised to teach the world important lessons’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 215). Oyěwùmí is therefore critical of the modern colonial linear construction of history in terms of which Africa forever needs to ‘catch up’ with the West and in terms of which the only legitimate account of the world is (regarded to be) the Western one. The modern colonial narrative of unidirectional progress in terms of which the West is understood as the pinnacle of civilization results in the ‘erasure of African cosmologies, demonization of indigenous religion, destruction of institutions, Othering of persons, and [...] epistemicide’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 4). Her point is that in terms of this rendition of history societies that are different from the West are regarded as primitive and lagging behind the West so that the unique ideas and knowledges they contain are regarded as irrelevant. As a result, Oyěwùmí explains, ‘provincializing the West’ is ‘an epic struggle’ because the alternative knowledges and epistemologies that would pose a challenge to the universality of Western knowledges, are erased (Oyěwùmí 2016: 4). Oyěwùmí therefore argues for the necessity to pursue the creation of new foundations for knowledge that correspond to African realities, rather than merely using Western knowledge frameworks and creating ‘African versions of Western things’ (Oyěwùmí 1997, 19). She argues that African scholars should not be content anymore to merely add their ‘burnt bricks’ to the foundations of thought that Europeans have laid (Oyěwùmí 1997:19). In her work Oyěwùmí is therefore resisting the colonial/modern erasure of the Yorùbá world by reimagining Yorùbá reality and drawing on this to construct knowledges that contest the univocal and linear modern Western rendition of history.

Lugones draws a distinction between the modern and the pre-modern that articulates this point very well. She finds this distinction in an unpublished manuscript of postcolonial scholars Juan Ricardo Aparicio and Mario Blaser who

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<sup>32</sup> Oyěwùmí’s views in this regard are not unique. It is widely argued that knowledge production on Africa is permeated by the intellectual authoritarianism of Western-controlled knowledge production which tends to subordinate the views of those who are the objects of study (see for example Schipper 1997). It is argued that because of the existing power imbalance between Africa and the West as sites of knowledge production, the risk is that when African knowledges go through the Western system of knowledge production, what comes out on the other side are not African knowledges but Western ideas about Africa and Africans, thereby again pushing African knowledges to the margins. Moreover, the point is often made that attempts by Western scholars to lift Other knowledges to the center, lead to the appropriation of such knowledges by Western scholarship in a way that legitimates or reproduces the knowledge of Western communities (see for example Krenceyova 2014). African knowledges are therefore (ab)used to confirm and maintain Western hegemony in knowledge production. Furthermore, it is argued that often only the ideas that conform to certain norms are accepted in the Western scientific space so that the inclusion of non-Western authors has a stabilising function in the hegemonic production of knowledge (Nyamnjoh 2004,344). South African poet Antjie Krog articulates this problem as follows: ‘[t]he West is like a vacuum cleaner, sucking up everything, mauling it to pieces within the debris of its own failures, and then it tells you: But we have already said this. Nothing can be said in the world that the West has not already said’ (Krog 2009, 155).

write that modernity exercises control through the denial of the existence of other worlds with different ontological presuppositions (Lugones 2010:749). The existence of other worlds is denied by robbing them of validity and co-evalness (the idea that they exist at the same time) (Lugones 2010:749). Lugones terms this denial 'coloniality' in so far as it turns the difference between modern and non-modern into a colonial difference: 'a hierarchical relation in which the non-modern is subordinated to the modern' (Lugones 2010:749). Modernity therefore constructs the exteriority of modernity as pre-modern (Lugones 2010:749). In other words, difference from the West translates to occupying a different position on a linear time line, so that difference from the West implies primitivity. Postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty similarly refers to the "'first in Europe and then elsewhere" structure of time' (Chakrabarty 2000: 8). He explains that Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity or Enlightenment which were all explained mainly with reference to the internalist histories of Europe while the inhabitants of the colonies were assigned a place 'elsewhere' (Chakrabarty 2000: 7-8). In terms of this structure of time Africans and other colonised nations were assigned to 'an imaginary waiting room of history,' in the sense that '[w]e were all headed for the same destination [...] but some people were to arrive earlier than others' (Chakrabarty 2000: 8). Like Oyěwùmí, Lugones, Aparicio, Blaser and Chakrabarty therefore make the point that history is constructed in a way that erased the histories, multiplicity and achievements of non-Western people by casting it as the non-modern or the primitive in the linear Enlightenment narrative. In this sense "'Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories' and all histories tend to become variations on the master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe' (Chakrabarty 2000: 27).

This is the logic that Oyěwùmí criticises and tries to resist. She is asserting the existence and validity of a world exterior to colonial modernity. With exteriority I do not mean a pure outside, untouched by colonial modernity. I use in the sense described by Latin American postcolonial scholar Arturo Escobar who writes:

The notion of exteriority does not entail an ontological outside; it refers to an outside that is precisely constituted as difference by a hegemonic discourse. This notion of exteriority arises chiefly by thinking about the Other from the ethical and epistemological perspective of a liberation philosophy framework: the Other as oppressed, as woman, as racially marked, as excluded, as poor, as nature. By appealing from the exteriority in which s/he is located, the Other becomes the original source of an ethical discourse vis a vis a hegemonic totality. This interpellation of the Other comes from outside or beyond the system's institutional and normative frame, as an ethical challenge (Escobar 2007: 186).

I therefore read Oyěwùmí to speak from a position of difference in a way that challenges the framework of colonial modernity. She is insisting on the value of an alternative reality and she tries to show in which ways it presents important challenges to colonial/modern knowledges and constructions of the world. Accordingly, when Oyěwùmí is setting up the 'West' or 'Europe' against the Yorùbá, the West or Europe should be understood not as a geographical location, but as the modern Enlightenment entity that presents itself as universal and swallows everything in its path. To understand this, Chakrabarty's qualification of how he treats the term 'Europe' is useful. Chakrabarty explains that he refers to Europe in 'hyperreal terms' that refer to a 'certain figure [...] of imagination whose geographical referents

remain somewhat indeterminate' (Chakrabarty 2000: 28). With the term 'hyperreal' he means that it is constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonised (Chakrabarty 2000: 40). It is therefore not a specific geographic location, but an 'imaginary entity' (Chakrabarty 2000: 43) that dominates the discourse of history and is 'reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern' (Chakrabarty 2000: 27-28).

I therefore read Oyěwùmí's reimagination and construction of the precolonial Yorùbá world as an act of epistemic rebellion against this imaginary entity. When Oyěwùmí is pitting the Yorùbá reality against the West, the essentialism that Bakare-Yusuf criticises her for is of strategic value.<sup>33</sup> By asserting the radical difference of the Yorùbá world she ruptures the universality that the West claims to represent and thereby attempts to displace the hyperreal West as/at the centre of history. Oyěwùmí could be argued to establish the Yorùbá world as totally distinct from and exterior to the West in an attempt to limit an entity that sees itself within everything else, or that sees all other civilisations merely as inferior versions of itself. If she was to emphasise the overlaps and interconnections between the Western and Yorùbá worlds, as Bakare-Yusuf would want her to, such a project might become impossible. It could be said that Oyěwùmí is working to make it possible for Africa and the West to constitute positions of mutual exchange, as Bakare-Yusuf and Mbembe envision, by opening up a space for African positions to exist through limiting and deuniversalising the West. On this basis, the way in which she treats the Yorùbá society as an 'object apart from the world' can be interpreted or read as the decentring of and moving beyond Eurocentric histories.

## V Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter it could be asked whether Oyěwùmí can, should or would want to be categorised as a feminist if she writes explicitly that her work is 'not about the woman question at all' (Oyěwùmí 1997: ix) and if she contests the existence of women in precolonial Yorùbá society. I answer this question in the positive. Oyěwùmí is a feminist in so far as she presents an authentically African version of gender equivalence which she locates and reveals in indigenous Yorùbá thought and culture. She challenges the dominant narratives (perpetuated by Westerners and Africans) that gender inequality is inherent to African cultures by rooting a sophisticated and fluid (as I will be arguing in the next chapters) model of gender equivalence within the cultural logic of precolonial Yorùbá society.

In summary, it was seen in this chapter that Oyěwùmí is firstly making an epistemological point. She is saying that as long as we assume that gender is universal as an organising principle in societies, the knowledges we are creating are erasing the Yorùbá reality (and possibly others too) and reducing it to a lesser or less developed form of Western reality. In her own work she attempts to bracket the dominant Western conceptual frameworks and tries to approach Yorùbá reality on its own terms. She attempts to create a theoretical position rooted in the reality of the Yorùbá rather than merely applying Western knowledges to the Yorùbá context. She therefore tries to sketch a reality exterior to the

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<sup>33</sup> I discuss the notion of strategic essentialism in more detail in Chapter Four with reference to the Western feminist context.

global modern Western order and to make a case for the fact that it is a world that is significant in its difference and from which the West can learn.

Secondly, I read Oyěwùmí to be making a metaphysical point. What emerges in her work is a reality where identity was multiplicitous, in other words, persons were regarded to be many things at the same time and it was fluid and dynamic, and not reducible to one side of the gender dichotomy. In her reconstruction of the precolonial Yorùbá world identity is fluid, relational, plural and dynamic and difference did not translate into hierarchy. She describes an order in which woman was not the Other of the subject and in which subjectivity was not defined along masculine lines. She contrasts this to the Western order in which she argues that all difference is constructed in terms of hierarchies and dichotomies. I therefore interpret her to assert more than a political or social difference when she claims that the Western concept of gender did not apply in Yorùbá society, but a metaphysical difference. In the next chapter I will explore this point in depth.

## **CHAPTER TWO** **OYĒWÙMÍ AND THE SUB-SAHARAN TRADITION OF RELATIONAL** **THOUGHT**

### **I Introduction**

In this chapter I explore the position of Oyĕwù mí more deeply. I show that there is a strong argument to be made that her work shares certain fundamental metaphysical assumptions with the tradition of African relational philosophy. In other words, some of the metaphysical ideas that are central to much of African philosophy (regarding for example the relational constitution of the subject and the continuity between matter and spirit) can be argued to be foundational also to Oyĕwù mí's gender theory. On this basis I show that it makes sense to read her work in dialogue with this tradition even though she does not explicitly associate with this tradition or make overt claims about the philosophical assumptions underpinning her work. I also show how Oyĕwù mí's work could be developed to contribute to the development of the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought.

There is a substantial body of work in sub-Saharan African philosophy analysing and theorising what is argued to be the relational or communalistic, fluid and non-dichotomous metaphysics underpinning sub-Saharan African cultures and thought. It will be seen below that these philosophers assert in different ways and with regard to many different sub-Saharan African cultures the existence of a fluid, relational and non-dichotomous world sense where identity is not constituted antagonistically, but relationally. In this chapter I root the gender equivalence which Oyĕwù mí argues to have characterised precolonial Yorùbá society in such a fluid and relational understanding of the world and the subject.

By proposing in this chapter that the work of Oyĕwù mí as an African feminist scholar could be argued to share core metaphysical assumptions with a big body of work in the African philosophical tradition, I then make an argument for the superficiality of the disciplinary rift between African feminism and African philosophy (as discussed in the Introduction). This is also relevant for the broader argument I am making in the dissertation about the decolonising potential of the work of Oyĕwù mí and African feminist thought more generally. I explained in the Introduction how (African and Western) feminism is often understood as being a recolonising force in so far as it is regarded as an imposition of Western frameworks onto Africa that is irreconcilable with Africa's indigenous worldviews. By pointing out how the feminist position of Oyĕwù mí can be argued to share certain fundamental metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought I show how African feminism can promote the indigenous world senses of Africa and how gender equivalence is not a foreign import in Africa but can be fundamentally in line with certain schools of African thought. Importantly, understanding the overlap in the work of Oyĕwù mí and the tradition of sub-Saharan relational philosophy also opens up new avenues for the development of sub-Saharan relational philosophy which has not yet seriously started engaging with gender issues.

In this chapter, by arguing that Oyĕwù mí's gender theory is embedded in a relational construction of the subject and the world, which she shares with the majority of sub-Saharan African philosophers, I also build on the point that I

made in the previous chapter regarding Oyěwùmí's insistence on Yorùbá (and African) difference from the West. It was seen that her work is criticised by scholars like Bakare-Yusuf for presenting Yorùbá culture as something apart from the world thereby reinforcing the colonial othering of Africa. I argued in the previous chapter that Oyěwùmí's assertion of Yorùbá or African difference is aimed at creating a space for Yorùbá society to construct its own identity rather than being swallowed up and erased by the West. I argued that she does this by highlighting the value and significance of the alternative constructions of the world, the subject and the social as found in precolonial Yorùbá thought and culture. In this way she offers resistance to the linear narrative of progress of colonial modernity in terms of which the West represents the pinnacle of human civilization to which all other peoples should still catch up. In other words, she is offering Yorùbá difference as an alternative equivalent to the Western world rather than merely as an inferior, less modern or more primitive version of the West. In this chapter I build on this by showing how through her gender theory, Oyěwùmí is not only making the argument that gender is not a universal concept, but inherent to her gender theory is an alternative construction of the subject and the world that poses a profound challenge to the established 'truths' of Western modernity, including those of Western feminism.

In the next section I give a broad overview of some of the central and widely held views in African metaphysics, in the areas of epistemology, ontology and ethics to highlight the fact that there is a strong and well developed tradition in sub-Saharan African thought according to which it is argued that difference, multiplicity and change are located at the center of the construction of subjectivity and the world. In the third section I link the gender equivalence of the precolonial Yorùbá society as described by Oyěwùmí with such a relational understanding. It can be argued that she understands the colonial/modern gender system to be underpinned by an atomistic, dichotomous approach to the world while the gender equivalence of the precolonial Yorùbá society flows logically from a relational worldsense and metaphysics. She does not make these connections explicitly, but I show how they can be argued to be implicit in her work. In the fourth section I highlight the implications of reading Oyěwùmí with sub-Saharan African philosophy.

## **II The relational and non-dichotomous construction of the subject and the world in sub-Saharan African philosophy**

### *a) Introductory comments*

Below I will show with reference to the central ideas of sub-Saharan African philosophers like Wiredu, Ramose, Masolo, Kagame and Murungi (among others) that it can be shown that the major and fundamental difference between Western and sub-Saharan African constructions of the subject and the world is the significance of community and

relationality that surface everywhere in sub-Saharan thought.<sup>34</sup> Where in dominant Western thought<sup>35</sup> identity (and I use the term in the broad sense, including personal identity, but also the identity of things generally) means ‘sameness’ and refers to the relation that everything has to itself, as distinguished from otherness, it will be seen that in sub-Saharan thought identity is most often understood to emerge in relation and in interaction with that which is other/different. In other words, there is a large body of work in sub-Saharan African philosophy in which it is argued that in most African cultures subjects, concepts and things are not understood in terms of sameness with a unitary ideal, but constituted in a fluid network of relations with all other subjects, concepts and things. Difference rather than sameness therefore sits at the heart of identity in sub-Saharan African thought. A result of this is that subjects, things and concepts are not fixed and stable entities that are understood in opposition to other subjects, things and concepts. Change and otherness is part of the structure of everything that is. So where in dominant traditions of Western thought change is a problem for identity (captured by the argument of Heraclitus that one cannot bathe in the same river twice), identity is mostly understood in fluid and dynamic terms in sub-Saharan African philosophy. In the thought of the majority of sub-Saharan African philosophers one therefore sees an emphasis on an absence of the stabilising dichotomies that generally characterise modern Western thought, including culture/nature, mind/body, self/other, public/private and transcendence/immanence (among others). In the work of most African philosophers these terms are not understood as being binarily and hierarchically opposed at all, because difference, otherness and change are all central to identity. Philosophers explain in different ways and with reference to different sub-Saharan African cultures how identity arises in a non-dichotomous way from within relations of difference. In what follows I show how the main ordering principles of sub-Saharan African thought and worldviews are relationality, multiplicity, fluidity and difference, rather than sameness, exclusion and stability.

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<sup>34</sup> My account of relational African thought is necessarily a partial and selective construction. Sub-Saharan African philosophy, although rather young, constitutes a vast and diverse body of work, and deals with thought emerging from countless different cultural groupings and histories. For every point I make it is thus probably possible to find a sub-Saharan African philosopher who asserts the opposite. However, that said, I do think sub-Saharan African philosophies of communality or relationality are characterised by certain overarching trends and themes that mark some central differences between this body of thought and traditional Western philosophy. It is on these overarching trends that I will be focusing in order to make a broad point about the kind of metaphysical assumptions that also underpin the work of Oyěwùmí.

<sup>35</sup> I also generalise with regard to the dominant Western views that I contrast with the sub-Saharan African position. For example, the dominant, Western, modern self or subject in opposition to which I assert the sub-Saharan African relational self, is a thinking substance whose embodied existence in a physical world among other people and beings does not pertain to its essence. This subject is thus an autonomous agent whose essence lies in its rational ability or spiritual capacity isolated from relationships with others and physical or biological situatedness. The body is peripheral to the rational subject as constructed by modern Western philosophy. The subject emerges in opposition to materiality and the other. Two of the most famous examples of this would be Descartes’ thinking subject and Kant’s transcendental subject of thought with an autonomous rational will. However, it can be said that both Descartes and Kant theorised the subject in more nuanced terms than what they are often getting credit for in the philosophical tradition. Moreover, this view of the subject as disembodied thinking substance has recently been subjected to extensive criticism within the Western philosophical tradition, starting with Husserl, Nietzsche and Heidegger and culminating in the work of Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault. Also, feminist philosophy has shown in various ways and on various levels how this is an incomplete account of subjectivity that serves the oppression of women (this can be seen throughout the work of Butler, Irigaray, Grosz, Kristeva and many more). Accordingly, although the notion of the disembodied self extends into contemporary Western thought, it is problematised within the tradition. When I contrast it to the dominant African relational notion of the subject (which is also contested terrain), I therefore use it as the dominant view of Western colonial modernity which has shaped Western philosophy into what it is today and which the African scholars reject, without claiming that it is the only view. The same goes for other aspects of Western thought that I contrast to African thought.



b) *The sub-Saharan African subject in relation*

The work of Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, whose metaphysics has been described as the most ‘systematically Africa-centered to date’ (Masolo 2010:11) and a philosophical reappropriation of African subjectivity (Spivak 1999:7) provides a good example of a non-dichotomous and non-exclusionary communalistic notion of subjectivity. Wiredu makes of the foundational nature of personhood ‘the pinnacle of African difference in philosophical theory’ (Masolo 2010:135). In other words, he holds the sub-Saharan African view of personhood to be the most far reaching difference between African and Western systems of thought. Kenyan philosopher D.A. Masolo makes the same point by writing that ‘[t]he idea that the metaphysics of individual identity is almost unimaginable without a community to make it possible is a crucial and distinguishing point of contrast between African and other philosophical traditions, especially the Western variety (Masolo 2010:134). Masolo explains that the difference between African communalism and the communitarian political philosophy that has emerged in European and American intellectual traditions (developed for example in the works of Alistair MacIntyre [1984, 1999], Michael Sandel [1992], Charles Taylor [1985, 1999] and Michael Walzer [1987]) is that community and the individual’s relation thereto is defined and experienced in a more robust way in the African tradition than in the Western one (Masolo 2010:14). In the African tradition the subject has a basic and fundamental dependency on others within the community and existence of others is an essential part of the very structure of the self, which is not the case in Western communitarianism which remains finally committed to and rooted in liberal individualism (Masolo 2010:14). Masolo’s point is therefore that in Western communitarian theory community is fundamentally exterior or secondary to the self, while sub-Saharan African communality implies that the other is part of the self.

Wiredu argues that the African subject challenges Western assumptions of metaphysics, epistemology and subjectivity in so far as in sub-Saharan Africa the subject is understood to be ontologically and metaphysically dependent on its being in relations with others. Rather than the subject pre-existing relationships as complete and fully coherent autonomous entity, Wiredu shows throughout his work how human capacities and personhood emerge from and through relationships and socialising processes with other humans and the environment. For Wiredu, existence is irrevocably relational. Wiredu writes that ‘[t]o exist is to be *somewhere*, and the so-called existential “is” or “to be” corresponds to no complete thought’ in the absence of an indication of place or relation (Wiredu 1998: 416). To make this point Wiredu refers to Alexis Kagame, the famous Rwandan philosopher, metaphysician and linguist, who writes that:

the celebrated axiom ‘I think, therefore I am’ is unintelligible in African thought, as the verb ‘to be’ is always followed by and attributed to an adjunct of place: I am good, big, etc., I am in such and such a place, etc. Thus the utterance [...] ‘I think therefore I am’ would prompt the question: ‘You are... what...where?’ (Kagame 1976:95).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Wiredu explains that although Kagame refers to the Bantu speaking peoples, his remark applies to the construal of existence in other language areas in Africa too (Wiredu 1998: 416).

Accordingly, Wiredu and Kagame argue the cartesian dualistic self which sits at the basis of the dominant modern Western view of the subject to be wholly inapplicable to the African context. According to them existence cannot be conceived of abstractly in the absence of concrete relations to the environment and other persons. Kenyan Christian philosopher John Mbiti famously writes in 1969 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am' (Mbiti 1970). Contrasting this to the axiom of Descartes reveals the difference in understanding of subjectivity in African and Western thought. The essence of subjectivity in sub-Saharan African cultures and thought is the capacity to enter into concrete relations with others, rather than the disembodied rational mind. On this basis Wiredu argues that the relational notion of existence is the most fundamental manifestation of the 'empirical outlook of African metaphysics' (Wiredu 1998: 415). Where in the dominant modern tradition of Western thought the essence of human existence is that which is thought to exist beyond from the empirical and the material (in so far as it is essentially located in the transcendent rational mind or spirit), African metaphysics as described by Wiredu and also Kagame as emerging from within material relations. Existence is thought with and through material otherness rather than against or beyond it.

Other sub-Saharan African thinkers who describe subjectivity in such relational terms include Michael Oyeibuchi Eze, John Murungi and Ifeanyi Menkiti. For Eze, a Nigerian anthropologist, the defining characteristic of personhood is to be in a dialogical relationship with others within a community (Eze 2009: 387). Subjectivity is in part constituted by other persons with whom the subject shares the social world and that social world is constituted by shared social intercourse (Eze 2009: 387). Kenyan scholar John Murungi writes that 'an African is an African in the context of other Africans, and, as a human being, he or she is a human being in the context of other human beings' (Murungi 2005:525). Similarly, Ifeanyi Menkiti, Nigerian poet and philosopher, writes that it is the community that defines the person as a person rather than an isolated quality like rationality or will (Menkiti 1984: 172).

Moreover, it is not just relationships between human beings that are crucial in this communalistic sub-Saharan philosophy. Menkiti writes that the notion of the extended self (a self that is not self-contained, but exists as part of the other) also surfaces in 'the lucid example of the human navel and the way it points us to umbilical linkage to biological generations going before' (Menkiti 2005). The communal relationship is thus not only with other living community members, but also with the already departed members of one's lineage. Menkiti explains that ancestors are 'continuing persons' who form 'part of the living community' (Menkiti 2005). Masolo also argues that the communitarian way of life does not only imply union with other people, but also with all other beings in the universe (Masolo 2005). In the same vein, Murungi writes that the other in dialogue with which subjectivity is constituted is not just the living other, but also the departed and those who are yet to be born (Murungi 2005:525). Furthermore, the other is not only the human other but everything that is animate and even that which is inanimate, the human being is 'part of what is' (Murungi 2005:525). Cameroonian philosopher Godfrey B. Tangwa writes that the precolonial traditional African metaphysical outlook can be described as 'eco-bio-communitarian' with which he means that it recognises and accepts interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans (Tangwa 2005: 389). He contrasts this with the Western outlook which he describes as 'anthropocentric and individualistic' (Tangwa 2005: 389).

Another implication of the relational understanding of personhood that is widely subscribed to in African thought, is the relational basis of morals. Instead of understanding moral principles as emanating from the autonomous, rational and transcendent mind, it is understood to be shaped through interaction between ‘socially conditioned and located persons whose minds are capacities of their bodily lives and experiences’ (Masolo 2010:172). The logic is that if the subject is constituted in its relations with others, the nature and quality of these relations are deeply significant for personal subjectivity. In this way subjectivity or personhood (as it is mostly referred to in African philosophy) also attains a moral or normative element. Personhood is achieved and/or maintained by relating to others in a certain way. American philosopher Thaddeus Metz working in South Africa on sub-Saharan African philosophy explains the idea as follows: ‘[t]he ultimate goal of a person, self or human in the biological sense should be to become a *full* person, a *real* self or a *genuine* human being, that is, to exhibit a virtue in a way that not everyone does’ (Metz 2010: 51). The community acts as a catalyst in this journey towards personhood and is a crucial source of norms (Menkiti 2005).<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, the sub-Saharan African communal subject is not defined with reference to a disembodied standard or ideal and its essence is not some rational core or spirit which is posited in opposition to the body. Rather, the subject is defined with reference to its embodied existence and interaction with other subjects. Subjectivity is always intersubjectivity that is also material. In Masolo’s words it can be said that ‘intersubjective penetration’ rather than aggregation is the formative foundation of personhood (Masolo 2010:139). In other words, rather than humanity being a gathering of separate selves, Masolo argues that the self in sub-Saharan African contexts is understood as something that exists as part of other selves in a way that defies clear boundaries. The human being is thus inherently social and is dependent on others for self-actualisation in a way that does not only affect superficial capacities, but cuts down to the core of personhood or being human. Individual consciousness thus cannot be understood as separate from its social dimensions. This means also that, unlike the modern Western subject who is supposedly autonomous, singular and insulated in so far as its true and unchanging existence sits outside the body, the subject of African communalism is embodied, exposed, socially dependent and inherently unstable because it is continuously (re)constituted in dynamic relations with other concrete others. The coherence and self-understanding of this subject is not dependent on an overcoming of materiality, particularity, interdependence and flux in so far as subjectivity is constituted through the interaction of vulnerable bodies in an ever changing community. What the subject is changes along with its concrete relations with others and its surroundings. What the self is, is therefore not something that can be determined and fixed autonomously by the subject, independently of others, but is continuously forged and continuously reworked in engagement with others. In this sense the self is open, exposed, fluid and vulnerable, rather than clearly delineated, closed off, fixed and autonomous. Murungi emphasises the fluidity of the relational subject. He writes that ‘one is what one is dialogically’ and that ‘[t]o be dialogical, which necessarily is to engage others, leaves open what one is, and

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<sup>37</sup> Importantly, Masolo explains that this does not necessarily imply a social constructivist position which assumes that ideas about the nature of persons conform simply to society’s views and norms (Masolo 2010:174). Masolo argues that the social constructivist position allows for the nature of every person to be different from other persons depending on the constructive cultural discourses and choices that have constituted them (Masolo 2010:174). Masolo argues that a position like Wiredu’s is a less relativistic one than is seen in the social constructivist position in so far as he grounds personhood in the empirical fragility of human biology so that dependence on others to grow and flourish is a real and universal characteristic of all human beings (Masolo 2010:174).

calls for dwelling in this openness' (Murungi 2005:525). What the subject is, is therefore never complete or final, it is determined through continuous mutual engagement with others. Subjectivity is therefore always provisional, and it is a communal and never ending endeavour in so far as it is continuously forged in dialogue with others.

Nigerian feminist scholar Amina Mama summarises the core of sub-Saharan relational metaphysics and thought very well when she writes:

There is no word for 'identity' in any of the African languages with which I can claim any degree of familiarity. Perhaps there is good reason for this. In English the word 'identity' implies a singular, individual subject with clear ego boundaries. In Africa, if I were to generalise, ask a person who her or she is and a name will be followed by a qualifier, a communal term that will indicate ethnic or clan origins (Mama 2001:63).<sup>38</sup>

She also writes that not only is there no all-encompassing concept for identity in big parts of Africa, but the kind of singularity that the term seemed to require is not attainable in African contexts where personhood constituted within communities (Mama 2001:64). She argues that 'identity [or subjectivity] is at best a gross simplification of self-hood, a denial and negation of the complexity and multiplicity at the roots of most African communities' (Mama 2001:65). Mama thus emphasises the multiplicity, fluidity and relationality of subjectivity in sub-Saharan African thought and cultures. She contrasts this to the singularity and stability of the Western subject.

*c) Non-dichotomous metaphysics*

Importantly, the emphasis on materiality described above does not mean a mere reversal of the Western model so that materiality simply displaces/replaces the spiritual or the intelligible. Rather, this communalistic or relational metaphysics implies that the dualism between materiality and spirituality or between body and mind falls away. Wiredu argues in this regard that the implication of understanding existence as relational is that African ontologies are 'devoid of sharp dualisms such as those of the material and the spiritual, the supernatural and the natural, and the secular and the religious' (Wiredu 1998: 416). Instead of these categories being construed in opposition to one another, the distinctions between them are blurred so that they exist as one reality, or as part of one another. Wiredu explains that in terms of this non-dualistic scheme everything that exists is part of 'a single totality of existence' (Wiredu 1998: 416). In such a totality God cannot be a purely external or transcendent being and the concept of nature has 'neither an explanatory utility nor even a basic coherence' (Wiredu 1998: 416). Nature as something devoid of culture or as something defined in opposition to rational human existence does not exist in so far as these categories are not distinguished from one another in this way, but all form part of a single whole. In other words, identity is not understood as abstract and autonomous and that which emerges in opposition to the material and empirical other, it is rather

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<sup>38</sup> Here the same criticism that is raised by scholars like Bakare-Yusuf against Oyěwùmí potentially applies to Mama, namely that she too easily conflates language with social reality without investigating how language sometimes works to mask certain aspects of reality. However, the argument she is making about identity summarises the overarching point in the work of the sub-Saharan African philosophers very well.

understood as being constituted within dynamic relationships with the environment and others. As a result identity is not conceived of in terms of dichotomies, but in terms of a complex and fluid play of difference. Wiredu writes that the kind of ‘ontological border-crossing’ implied by terms like ‘supernatural’ is rooted in a conceptual standpoint which is alien to traditional African thought (Wiredu 1998: 416), namely a conceptual standpoint in which being is constituted in dichotomous and exclusionary terms. Wiredu thus holds what has been termed a ‘quasi-physicalist’ view of reality (Masolo 2010:141). Masolo explains that what this means is that although Wiredu does argue for the existence of non-physical things, these non-physical things cannot be separated from the physical world so that any attempt to split reality into irreducible mental and physical substance is explicitly opposed (Masolo 2010: 152-153).

Wiredu argues that although the basic conception of personhood in Africa involves a material as well as a quasi-material element (conceived in some cases as the principle of life and in other cases as the basis of individuality) this does not translate into the duality between body and mind so central to modern Western thought (Wiredu 1998: 417). The quasi-material aspect defies boundaries of the matter/spirit categories in so far as that which is described in immaterial terms is never fully immaterial or fundamentally removed from earthly existence (Wiredu 1998: 417). This leads to an understanding of God, souls and ghosts as quasi-physicalist entities that are spatially located without obeying the known laws of physics (Wiredu 1987:161).

Numerous African philosophers have put forward similar non-dualistic understandings of the relationship between spirit and matter as underlying feature of the worldview of indigenous sub-Saharan African communities. Ghanaian philosopher Safo Kwame also uses the term ‘quasi-physicalism’ which he got from Wiredu to describe the traditional African philosophies of mind (Kwame 2005:346). Kwame explains that quasi-physicalism is not reductively materialist or physicalist so that existence can be fully accounted for in the language of physics (Kwame 2005:346). He explains that quasi-physicalism instead admits the possibility of objects that belong to a category between the realm of the obviously physical (those objects that obey the known laws of physics) and the realm of the spiritual (immaterial objects that do not obey the known laws of physics) (Kwame 2005:346). Quasi-physicalism therefore leaves open the possibility of the existence of entities that are not completely physical and that exist together with atoms, fields, energies, sets and numbers (Kwame 2005:346). The important thing here is that Kwame writes that these objects are not outright spiritual or immaterial, but are ‘fuzzy’ and thus still compatible with a limited version of physicalism (Kwame 2005:347). The mind is such an object which is neither a completely physical nor a completely nonphysical entity (Kwame 2005:347).<sup>39</sup> On this basis Kwame holds that the mind-body problem of Western thought does not arise in the philosophy of mind that is inspired by an African tradition such as that of the Akan (Kwame 2005:349).

Menkiti argues that ‘metaphysical understanding in traditional African thought so neatly dovetails with the regular understanding of physical nature that the two understandings ought to be seen as forming one continuous order of understanding’ (Menkiti 2006:108). In this regard Menkiti (2006:109) refers to philosopher William Abraham who

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<sup>39</sup> On this basis Kwame disagrees with Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye who characterises the Akans as dualist (Kwame 2005).

argues that what is called supernatural in the West belongs in the same space as the natural within the Akan conceptual scheme (Abraham 1962:50). Abraham explains that the Akan metaphysical view does not entail the spiritualising of nature but rather that 'nature was, if you like, supernature antecedently spiritual' (Abraham 1962:50). Menkiti notes that a belief in 'a single reality neither material nor immaterial' is one way of describing African thought (Menkiti 2006:125). However, he is hesitant to say that this means that everything in the African schema could be understood as being 'underpinned by spiritual force' in so far as the 'spirit-body divide has always been suspect in African usages' (Menkiti 2006:125). Menkiti writes that in the traditional African village the 'looseness' or 'ambiguity' regarding what constitutes the domain of the physical as opposed to the domain of the mental springs from an acknowledgment of the ambiguous nature of the physical universe (Menkiti 2006:125-126). He writes that the 'looseness or ambiguity in question is not necessarily a sign of indifference to applicable distinctions demanded by an epistemology, but is itself an epistemic stance, namely: do not make distinctions when the situation does not call for the distinctions that you make' (Menkiti 2006:126).

Tangwa writes that '[w]ithin [the African] world-view the distinction between plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual, is a slim and flexible one' (Tangwa 2005: 389).

Southern African philosopher Mogobe B. Ramose argues that '[t]he be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon *ubuntu*' (a word used in Southern Africa to refer to the idea that a person is a person through other people and therefore to express the communality of personhood) (Ramose 1998:270 - 271). He describes the logic of ubuntu as 'rheomodic'<sup>40</sup> (Ramose 1998:274). He uses the term to refer to 'the understanding of entities as the dimensions, forms, and modes of the incessant flow of simultaneously multi-directional motion' (Ramose 1998:274). The rheomodic character of ubuntu underlies the view prevalent in many sub-Saharan African societies that the universe is holistic and 'defines the African philosophic understanding of be-ing as a wholeness' (Ramose 1998:274). Ramose describes the African conception of being and the universe in dynamic and non-dualistic terms:

Epistemologically, be-ing is conceived as a perpetual and universal movement of sharing and exchange of the forces of life. The African philosophic conception of the universe is, to borrow from the Greek, *pantareic*. On this view 'order' cannot be once established and fixed for all time (Ramose 1998:274).

Again what one sees in the work of these philosophers is an understanding of being and identity in terms of concepts like flow, change and multiplicity. Importantly, these philosophers retain an interaction between the material and the intelligible, while maintaining that neither of the two can be reduced to the other. This means that the material is not

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<sup>40</sup> The term was coined in 1980 by physicist David Bohm in his book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* in which he argues that thinking in terms of processes of becoming rather than in terms of permanent object and being is a more realistic metaphysical basis for grasping the nature of reality. He uses the notion of the rheomode to refer to a new mode of using existing languages so as to give the verb rather than the noun the most basic role in language. This again shows that there are strands of Western thought that show strong similarities with sub-Saharan African thought.

sacrificed to support and sustain the intelligible. Identity and subjectivity are not attained through pressing down on and erasing matter, but are located within and constituted by a complex interaction between matter and spirit. This enables a symbolic economy that allows for ambiguity, change and difference at the heart of identity. This is particularly clear in Ramose's explanation of the rheomodic character of Southern African communalist approach to being and the pantareic understanding of the universe. Menkiti also notes that African philosophy adopts a 'dynamic and non-static approach' to human existence (Menkiti 1984:179).

### **III The relational and non-dichotomous construction of the subject and the world in Oyěwùmí's work**

In this section I connect the gender model (or absence thereof) of precolonial Yorùbá society as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí to this relational metaphysics. I show how the gender model she posits and theorises could be argued to be anchored in a relational and non-dichotomous understanding of subjectivity and the world. On the other hand, I show how, at the base of her criticism of the colonial/modern gendersystem, is the idea that this system is underpinned by a metaphysics that constructs the subject and the world in terms of hierarchical dichotomies. Her rejection of the existence of man and woman in precolonial Yorùbá society constitutes a rejection of a hierarchical and dichotomous approach to sexual difference and an exclusionary and individualist approach to subjectivity. The subject that she posits is a fluid subject which is continuously constituted in dynamic relations with others. Moreover, the subject that is located at the center of Oyěwùmí's gender theory is one of multiplicity and fluidity, one which is many things at the same time and that changes continuously in relations with others. I argue that in Oyěwùmí's work we see an extended self, a subject that is not self-contained, but exists as part of others, a subject that is not reducible to a fixed and immutable gender identity. Her rejection of gender in precolonial Yorùbá society can therefore be interpreted as being founded in a rejection of a certain construction of the subject and the world. I explain this in what follows below.

#### *a) Oyěwùmí and relational subjectivity*

It was seen in the previous chapter that Oyěwùmí argues not only that in Western society and thought subjectivity is modeled on the standard of the (white) masculine subject (in so far as women *and* Africans are excluded), but also that the rational subject of Western thought is a disembodied one, while inert materiality is projected onto all who are different (and therefore less than) the white masculine subject. Oyěwùmí thus argues that in the Western order the difference between man and woman implies a spirit/matter dichotomy, which, as was seen in the previous chapter, she connects to other dichotomies that she regards to play a central role in the colonial/modern gender system, namely nature/culture and private/public among others. As a result, Oyěwùmí argues gender to be an inevitably oppressive hierarchical dichotomy embedded in a range of other hierarchical dichotomies in which woman cannot be anything but the material negative of man as rational subject. It was seen that she writes that in the West '[d]ifference is expressed as degeneration' or as 'a deviation from the original type' (Oyěwùmí 1997:1). And 'in the West, women/females are the other, being defined in antithesis to men/males, who represent the norm' (Oyěwùmí 1997:33). In her criticism of the colonial/modern gendersystem, Oyěwùmí therefore focuses on the dichotomous world that this system introduces, in which the masculine presents the only real subject position.

She contrasts this to the precolonial Yorùbá gender system in which the world was not categorised in such oppositional and hierarchical terms. She connects the absence of such dichotomies in precolonial Yorùbá society to a relational understanding of identity:

In the Yorùbá world, particularly in pre-nineteenth-century Oyo<sup>41</sup> culture, society was conceived to be inhabited by people in relation to one another. [...] Social hierarchies were determined by social relations. [...] [H]ow persons were situated in relationships shifted depending on those involved and the particular situation (Oyěwùmí 1997:13).

She thus posits subjectivity in precolonial Yorùbá society as inherently relational and therefore dynamic and fluid (but nevertheless material), instead of immutable, essentialised and rooted in body type, because relations between people and the contexts in which they are embedded are continuously changing. In terms of this framework subjectivity is rooted in exchange between concrete persons and is therefore not given or predetermined. On this basis I read the fluid gender system (or the consequently ‘ungendered’ system) as posited by Oyěwùmí to be founded in the same relational approach to subjectivity that is so prevalent in sub-Saharan African philosophy. Instead of locating subjectivity in an unchanging and disembodied core (which is trapped in a material body) Oyěwùmí, like so many sub-Saharan African philosophers, could be argued to understand subjectivity to emerge from concrete relations between embodied selves.

Oyěwùmí argues that in the fluid, relational paradigm of precolonial Yorùbá society, identity is fluid and plural because it is not fixed with reference to individual attributes of the subject, but continuously reshaped in a dynamic network of relations. Accordingly, one is not permanently and exhaustively defined as ‘woman’ on the basis of having a vagina. In precolonial Yorùbá society subjectivity was not an ‘individually based, self-contained’ thing (Oyěwùmí 2016: 71) and therefore subjectivity was not fixed on the basis of physical attributes. This becomes very clear in the way in which Oyěwùmí rejects the existence of the category of ‘woman’ in precolonial Yorùbá society because she understands it to be a category which defines persons permanently and exhaustively regardless of their situatedness in specific relationships and contexts. She writes:

These essential gender identities in Western cultures attach to all social engagements [...]. The classic example is that for many years women could not vote solely because they were women. Another example is the genderization of professions to the extent that professional lexicons contain phrases such as ‘woman pilot,’ ‘woman president.’ And ‘professor emerita,’ as if whatever these women do in these occupations is different from what men do in the same professions (Oyěwùmí 1997: xiii).

And further (as quoted in the previous chapter):

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<sup>41</sup> This refers to a specific Yorùbá kingdom.



The upshot of this [Western] cultural logic is that men and women are perceived as essentially different creatures. Each category is defined by its own essence. [...] Consequently, whether women are in the labor room or in the boardroom, their essence is said to determine their behavior. In both arenas, then, women's behavior is by definition different from that of men (Oyěwùmí 1997:35).

Oyěwùmí therefore argues the Western category of 'woman' to be a category that defines woman in all situations and that is fixed and immutable. Oyěwùmí regards 'woman' in the colonial/modern gender system to be a category based on physical attributes, that determines what you can do, where you can be, what you should like and not like and how you should act. Central to her insistence that 'woman' did not exist in precolonial Yorùbá society is the idea that the isolated fact of possessing certain body parts did not exhaustively define persons in precolonial Yorùbá society nor determined and fixed the social and ontological hierarchies in which they stood toward one another. Oyěwùmí's work suggests that the relational understanding of identity in precolonial Yorùbá society undermines any attempt to attach such a fixed and singular identity to a person.

The fluidity of identity in precolonial Yorùbá society arises from the fact that it was organised based on the principle of seniority rather than gender. I explained in the previous chapter that Oyěwùmí argues that seniority, unlike gender is only comprehensible as part of relationships and accordingly it is not 'rigidly fixated on the body nor dichotomized' (Oyěwùmí 1997:42). Identity is therefore not determined with reference to the characteristics of the self and opposed to that which is other, but continuously forged in ongoing and dynamic engagement with concrete others. In this regard Menkiti's idea that the sub-Saharan subject is defined by the community rather than an isolated quality (Menkiti 1984: 172) resonates strongly with Oyěwùmí's position. Oyěwùmí writes that '[s]eniority, unlike gender, is relational and speaks to the collective ethos rather than to individual identity' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 10). With this I interpret her to mean that seniority is determined in interaction with others (in so far as one can be the oldest in one context while the youngest in another) while gender she reads to be a pre-established and essentialist notion that sticks to individual identity (individual identity being a contradiction in terms in African thinking). Oyěwùmí writes further:

This seniority-based organization is dynamic, fluid, and egalitarian in that all members of the lineage have the opportunity to be senior or junior depending on the situation. The seniority-based categories are relational and do not draw attention to the body. This is very much unlike the gender or racial hierarchies, which are rigid, static, and exclusive in that they are permanently promoting one category over the other (Oyěwùmí 2016: 71).

Here one sees how Oyěwùmí explicitly contrasts the colonial/modern gender system in which she argues identity to be static and determined with reference only to the self in exclusion of others, on the one hand, with the indigenous Yorùbá seniority system in which identity is relational, fluid and dynamic, on the other. In this regard Oyěwùmí's understanding of identity in a seniority-based system reminds us of Murungi's idea of the relational subject, that what one is, is established in a dialogical way and that this 'leaves open what one is' and calls for 'dwelling in this openness'

(Murungi 2005:525). Although there is hierarchy involved, the hierarchy is always provisional, never permanent. It could be argued that it is this 'dwelling in the openness' that Oyěwùmí regards to be sacrificed in the colonial/modern gender system where identity is reduced to fixed and immutable categories in permanent hierarchies. In line with the prevalent view of the subject in sub-Saharan African philosophy, the precolonial Yorùbá relational subject is fluid and is more than one thing at a time because it is determined by a multiplicity of dynamic relationships. 'Woman' as a label that places one in a category with a fixed position in society (belonging to the private domain, inferior to man), with fixed roles (nurturing, taking care of the body and the home), with fixed meaning (natural, embodied, domestic), means nothing in precolonial Yorùbá society because there one's identity is continuously (re)determined in relation to different others.

Moreover, I read Oyěwùmí to say that as soon as you start asking what a person is based on the way in which the person is situated in relationships, you do not get only one answer, but many. Persons are different things in relation to different people, so that every person is many things. In other words, the relational constitution of identity in precolonial Yorùbá society renders it plural and deferred in time. For Oyěwùmí the classic example, which I mentioned in the previous chapter already, is that in Yorùbá society it would not be strange or exceptional for a woman to occupy the roles of *oba* (ruler), *omo* (offspring), *iya* (mother) and *alawo* (diviner-priest) at the same time, 'all in one body' (Oyěwùmí 1997:14). Oyěwùmí's position could therefore be explained or reinforced by Wiredu's idea (mentioned above in the previous section) that 'is' or 'to be' corresponds to 'no complete thought' in the absence of an indication of place or relation (Wiredu 1998: 416). 'Woman' as a category independent of social relations and surroundings, but fixed with reference to physical attributes, did not make sense.

It was also seen in the previous chapter that Oyěwùmí traces the distinction between a relational and atomistic approach to identity in African and Western societies respectively, to the different models of family to which these societies subscribe, namely the African family-as-lineage system and the Western nuclear family system. I showed how she argues the emphasis on the individual in Western society to translate into the nuclear model of family, and vice versa, in which man emerges as the only subject and woman is erased through being subsumed as his negative. On the other hand, the dominant family structure in sub-Saharan societies consists of a large and dynamic network of interconnections in which identity and hierarchy are fluid and are determined by the configuration of relationships which are in constant flux. Implicit in her work is the idea that the nuclear family of Western society reflects a dichotomous metaphysics where identity is embedded in a range of dichotomies. In contrast to this, one sees in Oyěwùmí's descriptions of the family-as-lineage system that Yorùbá subject is a fluid and changeable one which emerges from within relations with other persons and things so that there is place for more than one kind of subject and so that subject identities are never essentialised or fixed into permanent hierarchies or oppositions. The family-as-lineage system reflects and promotes this in so far as it constitutes a flexible and shifting network which serves as the origin of a fluid and dynamic subjectivity.

Reading Oyěwùmí's work as being embedded in a relational understanding of subjectivity and reading her in dialogue with sub-Saharan relational philosophy therefore highlights that her assertion that woman did not exist in precolonial

Yorùbá society could be read to be more complex than a denial of the existence of gendered identities, it is rooted in a different construction of the subject. When Oyěwùmí argues that ‘woman’ does not exist, I thus read her to mean that in precolonial Yorùbá society such a specific and loaded identity could not be projected onto someone, nor did it cling to someone, in the abstract. In the precolonial Yorùbá society as reconstructed and theorised by Oyěwùmí subjectivity is relational and plural so that subjectivity depends on how one is situated in relation to concrete persons and contexts. As a result subjectivity cannot be reduced to the singular identity of ‘woman’ that Oyěwùmí regards to be predefined and predetermined and trapped in a fixed hierarchy towards another essentialised category, man.

*b) Oyěwùmí’s non-dichotomous construction of the world*

Another shared assumption between Oyěwùmí and a large contingent of sub-Saharan philosophy is the non-dichotomous construction of the world. I explained above that the absence of dichotomies in sub-Saharan African cultures and thought is a founding assumption and dominant theme in much of sub-Saharan African philosophy. Oyěwùmí’s gender theory is also underpinned by this assumption. This becomes very clear when she writes about the way in which hearing is the most dominant of the five senses in Yorùbá culture. As noted in the previous chapter, Oyěwùmí links the different approaches to identity of Yorùbá and Western societies (relational as opposed to individualistic) to the fact that, in contrast to the West which privileges sight, the auditory is the more dominant way of perceiving the world in Yorùbá society. She argues that the Western privileging of sight facilitates an atomistic approach to identity, and more specifically, gives rise to essentialised identities based on physical categories (Oyěwùmí 1997:14). In contrast to this the Yorùbá, who perceive the world through multiple senses without privileging sight, comprehends reality as a fluid and non-dichotomous whole:

More fundamentally, the distinction between Yorùbá and the West symbolised by the focus on the different senses in the apprehension of reality involves more than perception - for the Yorùbá, and indeed many other African societies, it is about ‘a particular presence in the world - a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together’ (Ba 1982). It concerns the many worlds human beings inhabit; it does not privilege the physical world over the metaphysical. A concentration on vision as the primary mode of comprehending reality promotes what can be seen over that which is not apparent to the eye: it misses the other levels and the nuances of existence (Oyěwùmí 1997:14).

Oyěwùmí therefore suggests that privileging sight in our approach to the world, leads to it being structured and ordered in terms of clear cut distinctions, hierarchy and essences. In contrast to this she regards an approach to the world anchored in hearing as allowing for multiplicity, continuity and flow. Oyěwùmí describes the precolonial Yorùbá world as an order in which the physical and the metaphysical, the self and the other and the feminine and the masculine are not defined in opposition to each other, but has meaning as only part of each other and in exchange with each other. This is therefore a fluid world in which change is not understood as undermining identity, but as a central aspect of identity. This quote reflects the idea of a non-dichotomous and fluid reality found in the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought, as described above and referred to by Wiredu as a ‘single totality of existence’ (Wiredu 1998:416)

and by Menkiti as ‘a single reality neither material nor immaterial’ (Menkiti 2006:125). It is also comparable to Ramose’s idea of a rheomodic universe in so far as it reflects a world that is understood in terms of wholeness, flow and motion. Oyěwùmí does not explain this distinction between a visual and auditory approach to the world in more detail. However, regardless of whether this distinction can do everything she wants it to do, it is clear that the distinction she draws between the Yorùbá and Western realities and gender systems has to do with a fluidity, multiplicity and relationality that she sees in the precolonial Yorùbá world, which she contrasts with the rigid, dichotomous and hierarchical construction of the world that she associates with the West and the colonial/modern gender system.

Her rejection of the existence of gender categories in Yorùbá society should therefore be read in this light. It constitutes a rejection of woman as fixed identity embedded in dichotomy and hierarchy, representing inert materiality, the body, the private, nature etc. while man represents transcendence, the mind, the public, culture etc. Through her assertion of a genderless precolonial Yorùbá society she is asserting an alternative construction of the subject, the world and the social, which one also sees reflected in sub-Saharan African philosophy. In the non-dichotomous world she sketches, subjectivity is not understood as a transcendent category construed in opposition to the other (woman but also the African and others who are different from the European male) who represents inert matter, because these binaries do not exist. Oyěwùmí’s gender theory hinges on the same construction of the world that one sees in the work of the sub-Saharan African philosophers discussed above. The world is constructed as ‘a single totality’ or a ‘continuous order,’ as being holistic, or characterised by ‘wholeness’ and in which matter and spirit, mind and body etc. exist together in a way that ‘defies boundaries,’ is fuzzy, loose or ambiguous, and exists in ‘incessant flow,’ ‘exchange,’ and ‘movement.’

### *c) Matricentric construction of the subject and the world*

There is another aspect of Oyěwùmí’s work that strikingly confirms that the subject she is working with is similar to the relational subject so prevalent in sub-Saharan African philosophy, namely the way in which she roots subjectivity in the connection with the mother and the way in which she theorises the mother as representative of universal subjectivity. I discuss the issue of motherhood in detail in Chapter Five. For present purposes I highlight only briefly the striking way in which the Oyěwùmí’s relational understanding of the subject comes to the fore in her description of motherhood. In her new book *What Gender is Motherhood?* (2016) Oyěwùmí introduces the term ‘matripotency’ (‘supremacy of motherhood’) or ‘matrocentricity’ (centrality of motherhood) as a lens through which to understand the indigenous epistemology of the Yorùbá that has been erased or marginalised by colonialism and coloniality (Oyěwùmí 2016: 2). She writes: ‘[m]ore than anything else, the different construction of motherhood demonstrates the seismic shift occasioned by European colonization and policies, the establishment of notions of individualism, Christianization, Islamization of the culture, and globalization’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 2). In other words, she compares the precolonial Yorùbá understanding of motherhood to the understanding of motherhood in the colonial/modern gender system and she regards the differences between the two to reflect a fundamental difference in how the world and knowledge about the world are construed.

Central to Oyěwù mí's analysis of motherhood is the significance of the bond that each person has with the mother (*Iya*) and the role of this connection in society. The way in which Oyěwù mí describes the *Iya*-child relationship suggests that this connection between mother and child is central to the notion of subjectivity. She writes that '*Iya*'s relationship with their child is considered to be otherworldly, pre-earthly, preconceptional, pregestational, prosocial, prenatal, postnatal, lifelong, and posthumous' (Oyěwù mí 2016:62). And the 'relationship between *Iya* and child is timeless' (Oyěwù mí 2016:62). She emphasises in many ways that the relationship with *Iya* is the most important relationship in every person's life and that this relationship has spiritual, metaphysical, material, social and political aspects. She writes that '[t]he necessity of *Iya* to their children's welfare is metaphysical, emotional, and practical' (Oyěwù mí 2016: 73). The destiny of mothers and their children are perceived to be spiritually conjoined (Oyěwù mí 2016:216). The bond with the mother is therefore present and relevant with regard to everything that happens to one in life and all the decisions one takes. Society recognises that 'the child survives and thrives only at the will of the *Iya*' (Oyěwù mí 2016:74). She writes further: '[i]t is understood that one needs one's *Iya* at every turn in life' (Oyěwù mí 2016:63). She also explains that the *Iya* is regarded to have mystical powers over their offspring (Oyěwù mí 2016: 64). She writes:

The bonds between *Iya* and a particular offspring are seen to be strong and of a different order than any other kind of ties. The *Iya*-child dyad is perceived as predating the earthly appearance of the child and therefore predates marriage and all other familial relations (Oyewumi 2016:60-61).

I read Oyěwù mí to posit the relationship with the mother as a core element of subjectivity so that the subject cannot be thought in isolation of the mother. The relational subject of Yorùbá society is first and foremost and always already and inevitably in relation with the mother. Accordingly the subject is not singular and unified, and the subject does not have clear boundaries that separate it from what is other. Otherness is not understood as antithetical to the self, but part of the self because the self exists primarily in relation to the (m)other. In her description of the importance of the connection with the mother in Yorùbá society, Oyěwù mí is therefore positing a radical alternative to the (illusory) oneness of the (implicitly masculine) self that she implies to be at the center of the colonial/modern gender system. She is also developing the idea of the relational self that is central to so much of sub-Saharan African philosophy in a very specific way by founding this relationality in the mother-child relationship.

Furthermore, the bond between *Iya* and child is foundational to all societal relations. Oyěwù mí writes that the '*Iya*/child dyad is the nucleus of family relations and indeed human society' (Oyěwù mí 2016:70). Oyěwù mí also writes that the 'most fundamental social unit' in Yorùbá society is matricentric – 'consisting of *Iya* [mother] and their children' (Oyěwù mí 2016:53). With this she means that instead of the singular rational (implicitly masculine and implicitly self-made) subject being the basic building block of human society, or the man-woman couple (where she regards woman to be subsumed under man in the colonial/modern gender system as explained in the previous section), it is the *Iya*-child pair. This is because every human is born from, and inextricably connected to, the *Iya*. Oyěwù mí explains that this 'places *Iya* in a position of seniority, an elder, whose presence is prior to anyone else' (Oyěwù mí 2016:71). She explains further that '[a]t the core of the seniority-based system is *Iya*' (Oyěwù mí 2016:58). She writes:

The efficacy of *Iya* is most pronounced when they are considered in relation to their birth children. The matripotent ethos expresses the seniority system in that *Iya* is the venerated senior in relation to their children. Since all humans have an *Iya*, no one is greater, older or more senior to *Iya* (Oyěwùmí 2016:58).

*Iya* is therefore fundamentally a relational concept. It is not always clear from Oyěwùmí's work what exactly the implications are of the seniority of the *Iya* in the seniority system as a whole. However, the point that I want to extract from the quote above is that the relation to the mother is at the core of the way in which people are organised and stand in relation to one another in society. On this basis it can again be argued that Oyěwùmí describes a fundamentally relational worldview. Rather than thinking of society as a collection of individual subjects, she argues that the precolonial Yorùbá people did not think of the subject in isolation of connections to persons and especially not in isolation of the most fundamental and profound connection, namely that with the mother. The subject of precolonial Yorùbá society as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí is therefore inherently relational and inherently in connection with the (m)other. Similarly, Nkiru Nzegwu explicitly connects the notion of relational identity and ethics in Igbo society with this emphasis on maternal beginnings by arguing that '[m]orality begins in our awareness of our relationship to the mother' and that '[t]his relationship coordinates the formation of interpersonal experiences that helps the child define him or herself in relation to others' (Nzegwu 2004: 12). Accordingly, Nzegwu argues the intersubjective and interrelational mother-child relationship to be the model for relationships among all persons. The communal ontology and ethics of the Igbo people are then rooted in the notion of motherhood. Nzegwu explains further that disloyalty to the mother or 'the breakage of the uterine ties of kinship' is 'tantamount to destroying the last covenant that makes our community human' (Nzegwu 2004: 12). This implies that the radical acknowledgement of the bond with the mother creates a certain kind of subject that does not view itself as an autonomous individual, but as an inherently dependent and interrelational one. Humanness or subjectivity are thus defined directly with reference to maternal beginnings which remain deeply significant to personhood throughout one's life.

Moreover, in her book *What Gender is Motherhood* Oyěwùmí posits the mother as representative of universal subjectivity for the precolonial Yorùbá people. This is in contrast to the dominant notion of the universal subject of modern Western philosophy and thought which feminism has unmasked as implicitly masculine and defined in opposition to the feminine and material (this is a crucial theme that runs through the work of western feminist scholars like Simone De Beauvoir, Irigaray, Christine Battersby and Adriana Cavarero for example). Oyěwùmí argues that in precolonial Yorùbá society motherhood was an ungendered category that is 'representative of humanity' or the 'archetypal human being' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 62). As a result the mother is regarded as a universal representative of subjectivity, and the figure of the kneeling mother (the birthing position) is the symbol for humanity in so far as it represents the fundamental relationship from which subjectivity emerges. Oyěwùmí writes that:

In Yorùbá culture mothers are representative of humanity, ungendered. This Yorùbá conception is in stark contrast to the male-as norm of the Western gendercentric model in which only men can represent universal human attributes (Oyěwùmí 2011:234).

According to Oyěwùmí the Yorùbá therefore think of subjectivity in fundamentally relational and plural terms: the universal representative of humanity is the mother who gives birth to another and whose connection with her child is timeless. Accordingly, the subject does not exist singularly, but always in connection with the other, it is a fundamentally plural understanding of subjectivity. Oyěwùmí further argues this ‘matricentric’ construction of the subject and world to be ‘community oriented’ and contrasts it to the individuality of ‘Western ideologies emanating from a racist capitalist patriarchal system’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 219-220). It is about understanding the self to always already and inevitably being in relation to others so that the advancement of the well-being of the community as a whole is central to the advancement of the well-being of the self and *vice versa*.

In Oyěwùmí’s understanding of motherhood one also sees how the distinctions between the spiritual and the material, between body and mind and between immanent and transcendent are problematised and traversed continuously. Oyěwùmí roots subjectivity in the material maternal connection, rather than understanding subjectivity as that which transcends the material. However, she also complicates this by challenging the idea that the connection with the mother is simply material, she describes the category of motherhood also as a spiritual category. For the Yorùbá the destinies of mother and child are spiritually conjoined (Oyěwùmí 2016:216) and the mother is regarded as having great spiritual power (Oyěwùmí 2016:128). Moreover, birth (which is usually thought of in the West as a purely physical moment) is also understood as an occurrence with many spiritual aspects (which I will discuss in detail in chapter 5). Oyěwùmí writes that ‘[t]he relationship between *Iya* and child is a bloody one, and blood is spiritually potent’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 128). The boundaries between matter and spirit are therefore crossed in a striking way. The way in which Oyěwùmí theorises the figure of the mother and roots subjectivity in the connection with the mother reflects the same complex interaction between matter and spirit that is central to the work of the sub-Saharan African philosophers introduced above. Oyěwùmí sketches a universe that is a holistic whole in which flow and exchange are the defining principles, so that there exist no real distinctions between matter and spirit, body and mind, immanent and transcendent. I explore this topic in detail in Chapter Five.

On the basis of these reasons (and others) Oyěwùmí argues that *Iya* is not a ‘gender category’ and not ‘the other half of fatherhood, the male category’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:66). I read Oyěwùmí to understand the Yorùbá category of motherhood to be one of multiplicity, fluidity and relationality. The mother is many things at the same time and is constituted in relation to others. The mother is not reducible to a unitary domestic or nurturing identity (like wife), but traverses the boundaries that define femininity in the modern/colonial gender system. Motherhood as a category also powerfully reflects the core principles or characteristic of precolonial Yorùbá metaphysics. The spiritual, metaphysical, material and social importance of the bond with the mother highlights the profoundly relational nature of Yorùbá society and subjectivity. The subject is not a singular and self-contained entity that exists in opposition to others and the community is not constituted by a collection of such singular subjects. Rather, the subject, the social and the

universe exist in connection and flow. Oyěwùmí understands motherhood in the colonial/modern gender system to reflect an individualistic and atomistic understanding of subjectivity and to be embedded in static gendered hierarchical dichotomies. Understanding motherhood as an ungendered role or position in precolonial Yorùbá culture and thought is therefore important to understanding the ‘indigenous episteme that was imposed upon by Euro/American ways of viewing and organizing the world’ (Oyěwùmí 2016:58).

Battersby’s work *Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (1998) in which she asks what happens if we model identity on the female subject, who can ‘at least always potentially, become two’ (Battersby 1998:2), is helpful in aiding our understanding of the implications and power of Oyěwùmí’s theorising of motherhood in precolonial Yorùbá society. Battersby explores an understanding of subjectivity that makes woman rather than man typical of subjectivity and which thinks in terms of relations of dependence. She argues that in the history of Western metaphysics ‘woman’ is ‘just a surface deviation; mere “appearance”; unrepresentative of that distinctive, underlying “essence” of humanity’ (Battersby 1998: 1). Battersby is therefore raising the same criticism against the modern Western order and the colonial/modern gender system as Oyěwùmí, namely that woman represents only the negative other and foil for man, who represents full subjectivity. Battersby engages in a thought experiment in terms of which she attempts to think identity anew so that subjectivity can be redefined through the female body and experience. She writes:

What would happen if we thought identity in terms that did not make it always spatially and temporarily oppositional to other entities? Could we retain a notion of self-identity if we did not privilege that which is self-contained and self-directed?

Battersby is therefore looking for a model of identity that is not dependent on the exclusion of that which is other, but one that exists through engagement and in relation with others. She outlines five features of such a model of identity. The first is natality, thinking of our maternal beginnings rather than mortality as the defining feature of human existence. The second feature that flows from the first is that persons are dependent and always within networks of unequal power relations. The third feature is that there is no strong self/other division, that the self emerges from ‘intersecting force fields’ rather than from the exclusion of the other. Fourth, the subject is embodied and exists within ‘fleshy continuity’ with others. Lastly, the self is ‘monstrous’ in so far as it is an intersection between categories that are usually set up as oppositional, like body and mind etc.

The precolonial Yorùbá subject could be argued to encompass all these elements. Firstly, as seen above, the bond with the mother is regarded to be timeless and central to subjectivity so that it is indeed birth rather than death that defines the subject. Secondly, I also showed above how Oyěwùmí explains that in precolonial Yorùbá society the subject is constituted within relation to others, rather than being something that exists by itself in isolation of that which is other. Third, the self is regarded as being fundamentally connected to the other in so far as the subject is not unified and singular but is always already in relation to the (m)other. Fourth, Oyěwùmí does not locate subjectivity outside of the



body but roots subjectivity in physical (as well as spiritual) birth from the mother. Lastly, it was seen that Oyěwùní problematises the categories of mind/body and transcendence/immanence in her ‘matricentric’ construction of the subject. The Yorùbá subjectivity that Oyěwùní posits therefore closely resembles the subject that Battersby posits as alternative to the implicitly masculine subject of Western thought and the colonial/modern gender system.

Battersby argues that contemporary feminism is still too ensnared in a metaphysics of modernity rooted in Kant’s transcendental idealism in terms of which subject formation is dependent on the exclusion of an other. With her thought experiment she is trying to construct an alternative metaphysics of becoming, in which a feminine subject position becomes possible because subjectivity does not need an other to exclude. In this way she is trying to displace or challenge the modern construction of subjectivity in terms of which the subject is dependent on the exclusion of a feminine other and in terms of which the female subject position is excluded. Battersby argues that this will enable women to become full blown subjects because it will mean that ‘[m]othering, parenting and the fact of being born [will] become fully integrated into what is entailed in being a human “person” or “self”’ (Battersby 1998:2). Moreover it entails ‘thinking relationships of dependence (childhood/weaning/rearing) through which one attains selfhood’ (Battersby 1998:2). This strongly echoes the precolonial Yorùbá world sketched by Oyěwùní.

The comparison between Battersby and Oyěwùní shows how deep the difference is that Oyěwùní is asserting between the Yorùbá gender system and the global capitalist Western colonial/modern gender system. The precolonial Yorùbá subject and world closely resembles that which Battersby thinks up as a radical alternative to Western metaphysics. This emphasises the way in which Oyěwùní is not merely representing an alternative theory on gender equivalence. Her position is rooted in an entirely different way of constructing the subject and the world: where self and other, transcendence and immanence, body and mind etc., are thought in fluid continuity rather than oppositions, where the self is an extended self and where the world is a non-dichotomous whole.

The resemblance between Battersby’s newly constructed ‘feminist metaphysics’ and Oyěwùní’s theorising of the precolonial Yorùbá subject and world also supports Oyěwùní’s assertion regarding the gender equivalence of precolonial Yorùbá society. Battersby constructs her ‘feminist metaphysics’ as alternative to the metaphysics in place in the Western order colonial/modern gender system in order to enable feminine subjectivity and gender equivalence. The way in which Oyěwùní’s construction of precolonial Yorùbá society conforms to all the requirements that Battersby sets in her feminist metaphysics therefore confirms the potential for gender equivalence in the world that Oyěwùní sketches.

#### **IV Implications of Oyěwùní’s work for the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought**

As seen above, reading Oyěwùní’s work as sharing certain central metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan philosophers working on relationality in sub-Saharan African societies and developing Oyěwùní’s thought in dialogue with this tradition, yields new insights on her position. It highlights that her rejection of gender as indigenous Yorùbá category has to do with her understanding of how the subject and the universe are constructed. In other words, reading

her in dialogue with sub-Saharan African philosophy provides insight into the kind of subject that is at the centre of Oyěwùní's construction of the precolonial Yorùbá world and also into how she understands this precolonial Yorùbá world to exist. This sheds new light on her gender theory. It also supports her insistence (discussed in the previous chapter) on Yorùbá *difference*, on the fact that the Yorùbá gender system cannot simply be treated like another version of a Western gender system and analysed on the same terms. In other words, reading Oyěwùní's understanding of gender relations in Yorùbá society as being embedded in a radically relational and non-dichotomous metaphysics that is also a crucial characteristic that sub-Saharan African philosophers ascribe to many other African societies and cultures, confirms that the Yorùbá context from which she is writing is imbuing her feminist position with something distinct, valuable and significant. Inherent to the alternative gender dynamics she is asserting, is an alternative construction of the subject and the world. Reading her alongside Battersby also emphasises this, as shown in the previous section. Her insistence of Yorùbá difference is therefore not simply a repetition of the colonial othering of Africa, but a resistant response to the idea central to modernity and coloniality that there is only one world with one logic. My point is that Oyěwùní is not merely presenting another feminist theory that should be analysed on the same terms as the feminist theories in the Western tradition. She is asserting through her feminist theory the existence, validity and significance of another world exterior/anterior to the West, which is erased through colonialism and coloniality.

Reading Oyěwùní's gender system as being rooted in the same metaphysics as one sees theorised in sub-Saharan African philosophy, has significant implications also for sub-Saharan philosophy. As explained in the Introduction, African philosophy has not been engaging with issues of sex and gender. Oyowe and Yurkivska write in this regard: '(d)espite the perennial problems of gender-related violence, gender discrimination and the increasing evidence that African society is in actual fact not gender egalitarian but sexist, African philosophy shows very little concern with gender identity or gender issues' (Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014:85). In support of this idea they quote Musa W. Dube, a theologian from Botswana, who argues that the issue of gender is visible in Africa philosophy by its absence whereby women are either subsumed by the 'we' of the Africans or absent (Dube 2000:20). Dube's point is therefore that the seemingly gender neutral subject of sub-Saharan African philosophy is implicitly masculine. Oyowe and Yurkivska develop this idea by arguing that African philosophers have seemingly fallen into a gender-blind essentialism (Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014:85). They explain this as follows:

What they have apparently achieved is to conceptualise what it means to be an African man while ignoring what it means to be an African woman. As a result of the assimilation of gender into other philosophical issues and the use of 'man' and 'he' to encompass all persons, the African discourse on personhood proceeds with a certain gender bias in favour of masculinity, which may at least partially be responsible for the subversive nature of the patriarchal tradition in Africa and the ways it continuously reinforces the status quo of male domination (Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014:86).

They therefore argue that in the tradition of sub-Saharan African philosophy the gender neutrality of the subject masks a masculine bias, similar to what Oyěwùní (and a long line of Western feminists including Battersby and Irigaray as

will be seen in Chapter Four) identifies in the colonial/modern gender system. The masculine represents the subject while the feminine is the other.

This absence of engagement with gender in sub-Saharan African philosophy and the use of a (seemingly) gender neutral subject is exactly what Oyěwùmí is *not* promoting when she argues for the gender neutrality of precolonial Yorùbá society. In other words, the absence of any mention of gender in sub-Saharan African philosophy that Oyowe, Yurkivska and Dube are referring to, does not imply the same kind of ungendered subject that Oyěwùmí identifies in precolonial Yorùbá society. According to Oyěwùmí's theory the ungenderedness of the Yorùbá subject is anchored in real gender equivalence where identity is fluid and cannot be fixed in a static gender dichotomy. In contrast to this, Oyowe, Yurkivska and Dube are highlighting the way in which implicit to sub-Saharan African philosophy there is a rigid gender dichotomy in terms of which the feminine is subsumed by the masculine. This dynamic is exactly what Oyěwùmí argues to be *absent* in precolonial Yorùbá society.

Oyěwùmí's work shows how understanding the subject in fluid and plural terms, as something (re)created in relationships with people, as is a central theme in so much of sub-Saharan African philosophy, undermines any rigid gender dichotomies and hierarchies. In other words, the implication of her theory is that if I am what I am through my relations with other people, then my identity is never fixed, it cannot be fully determined with reference to my own physical attributes and my social inferiority or superiority is not inherent to me, but is always shifting in a tense and dynamic network of relations. Oyěwùmí's work therefore implies that the fluid and relational subject of sub-Saharan philosophy is not dependent on nor reconcilable with the implicit exclusion of femininity that one sees happening in sub-Saharan African philosophy. Her work shows that the relational subject is not singular, but plural in the sense that it also contains the other or exists in connection with the (m)other. Moreover, her work shows that the subject is fluid and that it changes in exchange with others. In this framework subjectivity cannot be understood as singularly and immutably masculine in exclusion of that which is other. Her work therefore suggests that the relational subject of sub-Saharan philosophy should be explicitly reframed and theorised to reflect the gender multiplicity, fluidity and equivalence that relationality implies. How that should be done depends on the specific African context in which each philosopher is working, but Oyěwùmí's work suggests that failing to engage with this issue renders the sub-Saharan relational philosophy incoherent and contradictory.

Importantly, because Oyěwùmí could be argued to root the Yorùbá system of gender equivalence in factors that are central to the metaphysical understanding of subjectivity, identity and the world that she shares with the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought, her work also highlights the *possibilities* that sub-Saharan African philosophy offers for promoting gender equivalence in contemporary African societies. Her work shows how if the world is not construed in terms of hierarchical dichotomies, but understood and experienced as a complete whole characterised by fluidity and multiplicity, as seen in the work of a strong contingent of sub-Saharan African philosophers, then hierarchical dichotomies that have been central to the construction of masculinity and femininity in the patriarchal colonial/modern gender system, for example mind/body, culture/nature, transcendence/immanence etc., are deconstructed. Moreover, in so far as the self is understood as an extended self that exists in connection with the (m)other, a self that does not

exist in exclusion of the other, but through the other, there is no cause for the exclusion, subjugation and marginalisation of femininity as seen in the construction of the modern Western (masculine) subject of colonialism and coloniality. She therefore highlights the inherent feminist potential and power of sub-Saharan African philosophy rooted in indigenous African cultures and worldviews. This presents a new direction in which sub-Saharan African thought can be developed. It also shows how sub-Saharan African feminists can use sub-Saharan African philosophy in their work to inform and strengthen their claims. In this way the disciplinary rift between African feminism and African philosophy can be overcome.

## **V Conclusion**

In this chapter I explored the philosophical or metaphysical assumptions underpinning the gender theory of Oyěwùmí. It was seen that Oyěwùmí criticises the dichotomous logic in terms of which the subject and the world are constructed in the colonial/modern gender system and holds that to be the basis of the oppressive nature of this system. In contrast, I read her to root the gender system of precolonial Yorùbá society in a fluid and plural approach to the world and a relational construal of subjectivity. In her descriptions of precolonial Yorùbá society, identity and subjectivity are fluid, characterised by multiplicity and constituted in concrete relations with different others. The self is an extended self that exists in connection with the (m)other and is continuously shaped in relation to others.

I showed in this chapter that there is a strong argument to be made for the fact that the feminist position of Oyěwùmí is underpinned by similar metaphysical assumptions that are central to the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought. The implication of this is that there exists important common ground between Oyěwùmí's feminist position and sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality. In this chapter and dissertation I show that there is a lot to gain from reading the feminist position of Oyěwùmí in relation to African traditions of philosophy. I argued that Oyěwùmí's work poses a challenge to the seemingly neutral but implicitly masculine subject of sub-Saharan African philosophy and highlights the need to explicitly engage with the gender implications of relational subjectivity. Moreover, I argued that Oyěwùmí's work also suggests that the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought can be interpreted to inherently support a certain form of gender equivalence and offer resistance to patriarchal oppression in so far as it is centred on a fluid, plural and relational conception of subjectivity and a non-dichotomous understanding of the world. Reading Oyěwùmí together with sub-Saharan African philosophy therefore shows the feminist potential of sub-Saharan African philosophy. This presents a new direction in which the tradition of sub-Saharan philosophy can be developed. In this way Oyěwùmí's work could be interpreted to overcome the fundamental tension between (African) feminism on the one hand and African indigenous thought systems and cultures on the other.

I also showed how understanding the precolonial realities posited and theorised by Oyěwùmí in terms of certain ideas and concepts developed in the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought, sheds new light on her position, helps to deepen her arguments and provides new footholds for engaging with her work in a critical manner. I argued that reading her with sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality highlights the idea that implicit to her gender theory is a rejection of a dichotomous view of the world, and especially a dichotomous understanding of man/woman or

masculine/feminine, and an assertion of a fluid, non-dichotomous and relational approach to identity and subjectivity in precolonial Yorùbá society and thought. Accordingly, I do not understand her to be saying that the precolonial Yorùbá society was blind to the differences between males and females, but that woman as an inherently inferior being, with a determined and stable gender and sexual position and defined in opposition to and as negative to man, did not exist. If Oyěwùmí is understood to subscribe to a relational and non-dichotomous understanding of identity and subjectivity in which subjects are constituted in their relations with others who are different, her rejection of the existence of man and woman in precolonial Yorùbá society can be read as a rejection of the existence of a subject defined by sameness, stability and dichotomy, in favour of one who was defined by difference, fluidity and multiplicity.

In this chapter I therefore make a case for the importance of mutual exchanges between Oyěwùmí (and potentially also other African feminist scholars) and African philosophy and the advantages of such exchanges for both mainstream African philosophy and African feminist thought. In the next chapter I draw on the connections that I identified in this chapter in the work of Oyěwùmí and sub-Saharan African philosophy, to make an argument regarding the decolonising power of Oyěwùmí's arguments.

## CHAPTER THREE

# AFRICAN FEMINISM AS DECOLONISING FORCE

### I Introduction

In this chapter I present the central argument of this dissertation, namely that Oyěwùmí's feminist project constitutes a decolonising pursuit. She shows how the colonial imposition of gender in Yorùbá society is central to the colonial production of subjectivity and ordering of life and reality. In other words, her work shows how gender is inextricably intertwined with race in the workings of colonial power and the subjugation of the 'native'. I read her to suggest that colonial modernity imposed an exclusionary and oppositional metaphysics or worldview on the Yorùbá society in terms of which the relational and fluid Yorùbá subject and world were reduced through the British system of colonial administration to rigid hierarchical dichotomies, to which the man/woman dichotomy is central. I show how she understands the creation of man and woman (for her two dimorphic categories that inherently exist in a hierarchical and dichotomous relationship) in Yorùbá society to be inseparably connected to the construction of the world in terms of other dichotomies like human/non-human, culture/nature, mind/body and one/Other. I therefore argue in this chapter that Oyěwùmí shows how the colonial creation of man and woman in Yorùbá society constituted a violent disruption of the self-in-relation (as described in Chapter Two), in so far as it is central to a paradigm in which selves and the world are structured and ordered in terms of hierarchy, dichotomy and exclusion. She shows further how the colonial creation and inferiorisation of woman in the Yorùbá society was pivotal to the transformation of politics, trade, religion and the social. Her work therefore implies that the full extent of the colonial inferiorisation of the black body cannot be grasped unless one understands the sexual or gendered dimension thereof. Accordingly, her work suggests that feminist projects that reveal and engage with the sexual dimension lodged at the heart of the inferiorisation and racialisation of the colonised are critical to tackling the task of decolonisation.

I explained in the Introduction that discourses on decolonisation on the African continent rarely pay any attention to the issue of gender. In fact, I explained how feminist work (Western and African) is often regarded as being a *recolonising* force in so far as it is assumed to be in fundamental tension with Africa's indigenous worldviews and authentic social arrangements. It is therefore often rejected as an imposition of Western frameworks onto Africa. Seen in this light, Oyěwùmí's work represents a significant intervention in discourses on decolonisation on the African continent. Her work suggests that decolonisation requires the critical investigation of gender structures and practices in African societies and their pivotal role in sustaining the hierarchical, exclusionary and oppositional metaphysics of Western colonialism and modernity and the ongoing subjugations of African peoples by the West. Her work shows the need to reform projects of decolonisation to thoroughly integrate into their self-understanding a deep appreciation of how central the ongoing, dynamic and powerful processes of sexualisation are to the workings of colonialism and coloniality. In other words her work implies that feminist projects like her own are critical to the endeavour of decolonising African society in so far as it reveals, engages with and attempts to address a crucial axis of colonial power. In this way her work powerfully deconstructs the understanding of feminism as either inherently recolonising,

or marginal to the decolonising project, by showing that feminist voices situated within local perspectives and speaking from within local experience have a crucial role to play in the decolonisation of African societies.

However, I also argue in this chapter that although Oyěwùmí's work strikingly and convincingly shows the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system to be instrumental in the subjugation of the Yorùbá people in colonialism and coloniality, she is not clear about the details of exactly how gender and race relate to each other in colonial logic. In other words, it will be seen that she asserts that the process of creation and inferiorisation of woman in Yorùbá society was inseparable from the process of the colonial reduction of Yorùbá people to 'natives' on the basis of race. She illustrates it through a concrete historical analysis how this played out in Yorùbá society, but does not explain the connection between gender and race in detailed theoretical terms. She therefore leaves her readers wondering about how exactly, on a conceptual level, race and gender interact or how the man/woman distinction connects to the coloniser/colonised or human/non-human distinction. In this chapter I use Argentinian feminist philosopher Maria Lugones's theorisation of the connection between race and gender in the logic of colonialism and coloniality as a route through which to sharpen the conceptual links in Oyěwùmí's work. Lugones argues that the categories of man and woman, where man is an active subject of reason and woman is his passive, material negative, are creations of colonial modernity that were (and still are) imposed on the realities of the colonised. Lugones's theory resonates strongly with Oyěwùmí's position in so far as Oyěwùmí regards the categories of man and woman to be modern Western constructs that were imposed on the Yorùbá society as first step in the creation of the colonial society. The more detailed conceptual links that Lugones draws between race and gender in the logic of colonialism and coloniality will be used in this chapter to inform Oyěwùmí's theory in order to fill in the theoretical details that she does not make explicit.

In the next section I provide some perspectives on what decolonisation is and what it requires in Africa today. In section three I outline Oyěwùmí's arguments that connect gender and colonialism in precolonial Yorùbá society. Lastly, in section four, I show how Oyěwùmí's position concerning gender and race could be informed and is sharpened through the theoretical position that Lugones develops in her work.

## **II Colonialism, coloniality and decolonisation**

Decolonisation is a complex concept that is understood in many different, often competing and contradictory ways. It is especially confusing when used today long after the political and juridical demise of colonialism. In this section I briefly look at why it is a process that is still regarded as necessary so many decades after the ending of colonial rule, and what it needs to do.

African scholars, including Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), Kwasi Wiredu (2004), Claude Ake (2000) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), have written widely about the arrested or truncated decolonisation of Africa and have formulated trenchant critiques against the term 'postcolonialism' in so far as it suggests that colonialism is a thing of the past and that we have entered a new era beyond colonialism. They argue that even though Africa has attained official political independence from former colonial powers (for most sub-Saharan African states this happened between the 1960s and

the 1990s), the term ‘postcolonial’ obfuscates the continuities between colonial Africa and current day, independent Africa and the extent to which Africa is still shaped by Eurocentred capitalist power on economic, political and intellectual levels. South African historian Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains that the ‘envisaged new African postcolonial world and a new African humanity that were expected to be borne by the decolonisation struggle were soon captured and engulfed by strong neocolonial<sup>42</sup> imperatives that shaped the African liberatory process’ so that the “‘postcolonial’ dispensation was submerged and engulfed by the “neocolonial” world’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:4). He understands the African postcolonial world to be a neocolonial one which is a racially-constructed world built by Western modernity, of which the structures and modes of power continue to impinge on African identity formations, nation-building projects, and politics of knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:11). Accordingly, the argument is that despite the formal system of colonialism being abolished, postcolonial Africa is still ensnared by colonial power relations on economic, cultural, political and intellectual levels in so far as all the structures and modes of power of Western modernity are still in place.<sup>43</sup>

In his book *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa* (2013) Ndlovu-Gatsheni analyses the continuities between imperial power in Africa in colonial times and the system of global Western capitalism as it operates in Africa today. He draws on the ‘critical coloniality perspective’ which is articulated by radical Latin American scholars operating under the Modernity/Coloniality Research Programme through which they pursue ‘decolonial thinking’ that transcends the postcolonial neocolonised paradigm (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:7).<sup>44</sup> Prominent figures here include Peruvian sociologist and humanist thinker, Anibal Quijano, Latin American scholar in comparative literature, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Argentinian semiotician Walter D. Mignolo and Porto Rican sociologist Ramon Grosfoguel.<sup>45</sup> Like Ndlovu-Gatsheni, I find this framework to be helpful for understanding the relation between current day Africa and its colonial past.<sup>46</sup> It helps to explain the claims of African scholars that Africa is still entangled in unequal and oppressive power relations with the West not much different from those of colonialism.

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<sup>42</sup> This term describes the continued economic and cultural influence of countries from the ‘developed world’ in the internal affairs of the countries of the ‘developing world.’ Colonial control is maintained, long past the judicial ending of colonialism, through the international economic arrangements that former colonial powers maintain with the former colonies. The term was coined by former president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and was the title of his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965).

<sup>43</sup> This argument is also made in feminist postcolonial scholarship. In this regard, Anne McClintock uses the term ‘imperialism-without-colonies’ to refer to the way in which the West has military, political, economic and cultural power to command flows of capital, research, consumer goods and media information around the world with even greater subtlety, innovation and variety than was the case under formal colonialism (McClintock 1995:13). Similarly, Spivak uses the term ‘postcolonial neocolonial world’ (Spivak 1990: 166) to refer to the way in which Western imperial power structures are still shaping the world today.

<sup>44</sup> One of the Latin American scholars involved in this project, Arturo Escobar, explains the goal of the project as follows: ‘the [Modernity/Coloniality] program should be seen as another way of thinking that runs counter to the great modernist narratives [...]: it locates its own inquiry in the very borders of systems of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-eurocentric modes of thinking’ (Escobar 2007:180). Escobar explains further that the Modernity/Coloniality program is exploring the possibility to think about, and to think differently from, an ‘exteriority’ to the modern colonialism and colonial modernities and the possibility of constituting alternative local and regional worlds (Escobar 2007: 183-184).

<sup>45</sup> In an epistemic sense the group is anchored in Latin America in so far as it has roots in Latin American experience (Escobar 2007:191). Geographically speaking it is made up by a network of sites in Quito, Botoa, Durham-Chapel Hill, Mexico City and Berkeley (Escobar 2007:191).

<sup>46</sup> In *What Gender is Motherhood?* (2016) Oyěwùmí also briefly refers to Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s work on coloniality to explain the way in which knowledge production in Africa is still ensnared in the colonial matrix of power (Oyěwùmí 2016: 4).



In terms of this perspective the 'postcolonial' world is a myth because the multiple global structures put in place before and during colonialism have not been dismantled and still shape our worlds (Grosfoguel 2007:219). Previously colonised nations, like those of Africa, continue to live under the same 'colonial power matrix' (Grosfoguel 2007:219). Formal juridical-political decolonisation meant a move from global colonialism to 'global coloniality' (Grosfoguel 2007:219). Quijano defines the notion of 'coloniality' as follows:

Coloniality is one of the specific and constitutive elements of the global model of capitalist power. It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the global population as the cornerstone of that model of power, and it operates on every level, in every arena and dimension (both material and subjective) of everyday social existence, and does so on a societal scale (Quijano 2000a:342).

The continuity that these scholars discern between colonialism and global capitalism today is thus that both of these systems of power operate on the basis of a racial/ethnic classification of the people and groups of the world. Accordingly, rather than understanding relations of superiority and inferiority in terms of factors like unequal wealth and power, it transforms them into naturalised relations on the basis of biology, for example, being white and Western means being more advanced than being black and African. In other words colonialism, slavery and other forms of oppression by Europe were justified and naturalised on a biological basis with reference to the idea of white racial superiority, rather than being recognised as an exercise of brute force. Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains the difference between coloniality and colonialism as follows:

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation of a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus coloniality survives colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2007:243).

The term coloniality therefore also refers to the patterns of power that emerged from colonialism and that continue to shape all dimensions of life today, despite the formal ending of colonialism. Coloniality, or the patterns of power founded in the racial categorisation of the global population, is one of the constitutive elements of both colonialism and global capitalist power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:128). Coloniality is inseparable from Western modernity, which is the paradigm in which Europe was mythically conceived (through a one-sided and Eurocentric construction of history) to be 'the most advanced moment on the linear, unidirectional, continuous path of the species' (Lugones 2007:192). The critical coloniality perspective in other words refuses to restrict the colonial legacy to the former colonies' territories, but points out the colonial logic alive and kicking in the heart of the former coloniser and the former empire themselves. According to this logic other human inhabitants of the planet were understood as constituting an anterior stage in the history of the species in this linear, unidirectional path, rather than being dominated by conquest or as inferior in terms of wealth and political power (Quijano 2000b:343-344). In other words, under coloniality, a biological (race) theory is used to naturalise, justify and 'explain away' vast inequalities of power and wealth, health, life-chances,

and so on. Coloniality and modernity together then give shape to a 'postcolonial' world which is hostage to the Western world view and in which there is no place for alternative modernities and imaginations of the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:39-40).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni uses this 'critical coloniality' perspective as a framework through which to understand the problem of neocolonialism in Africa. What this framework makes clear is that colonialism is not an isolated event in Africa's past, but that patterns of power and the structures (economic, ideological and political) on which colonialism was built and through which it operated did not evaporate with its formal abolition. Understanding present day Africa to be ordered by the same patterns of power as colonised Africa shows that decolonisation is thus not about removing a few last remnants of colonialism (like economic and social structures, policies and laws), it is about enabling Africa to become an active agent in creating its own future that resists, contests and disrupts these patterns of power.

In so far as colonialism or coloniality constitutes a global system in terms of which the population is hierarchically categorised on the basis of race and in terms of the linear and unidirectional logic of modernity, it does not merely entail a political and economic reordering of society, but it most insidiously works also on the level of subjectification. The colonised subject is subalternised in so far as its oppression is naturalised in biological terms and its culture, knowledges and history are marginalised as pre-modern or representing an anterior stage in the process of human development. As a result the consequences of coloniality extend to the level of the 'transformation of African consciousness' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:23) or the reformation of the minds of the colonised (Mudimbe 1988:2). On this basis it can be said that colonialism and coloniality therefore also operate on the level of subjectification. Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains powerfully what the concrete effects are for people when their oppression is naturalised and their histories are reduced to a sub-plot in the master narrative of European history and portrayed in terms of lack or absence. Ngugi writes that the biggest weapon of imperialism is how it manages to:

[...] annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own (Ngugi 1981:17).

It is thus an effect of colonialism and coloniality that Africans are cut off from their own history and alienated from their cultural identities and heritages. Seen in this light decolonisation would then also demand a process of resubjectification of African people in line with their own histories, values and cultures. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains that breaking the snares of the postcolonial neocolonised world will require epistemic rebellion that enables the formerly colonised people to re-imagine another world free from Western hegemony (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:263-264). Similarly, Ngugi articulates the quest for decolonisation for Africans as 'an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space' (Ngugi 1981:18). Ngugi calls for the 're-membering of Africa' after being 'dismembered' by colonialism which will

require various forms of imagination, visions and deliberate initiatives (Ngugi 2009). Indian political theorist Bhikhu Parekh understands decolonisation as requiring the development of counter epistemologies of alterity rooted in African worldviews, histories and philosophies that have been marginalised by Western modernity and labeled as primitive (Parekh 1995).

Decolonisation is therefore understood in this dissertation to be also about clearing a space in which it becomes possible to imagine new subjectivities and futures rooted in African histories and cultures. It is about thinking backwards and forwards at the same time, a creative alliance of memory and imagination in order to reimagine African subjectivities, cosmologies and histories beyond or against the oppressive narratives and discourses of global, colonial, modern capitalism. This requires critical, rigorous and creative thinking from lived experience, in a way that centres the material and symbolic conditions of one's own existence. I deem a thinking that is situated in local perspectives (in terms of time and place, the here and the now) necessary to displace, limit or 'provincialise' (as discussed in Chapter One) 'Europe' as scene of the birth of the modern and the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories.

Part of the process of centering one's thinking as an African in one's own world, and an idea which is prevalent in the scholarship on decolonisation, is that its African-centeredness should not be understood as an attempt to return Africa back to what it was before the Europeans arrived. I also dealt with this issue in Chapter One while discussing the reception of Oyěwùmí's work. Many scholars, like Achille Mbembe question the existence of 'pure' precolonial African cultures untainted by any Western influence (See for example Mbembe 2007). However, even if one does assume the existence of something like pure precolonial African cultures, reaching back in time and determining exactly what these cultures looked like is impossible. Moreover, imposing a specific notion of 'pure' African culture on Africa people today would amount to a problematic essentialising, simplification and fixation of African people and culture in a way that ignores how African societies have changed and are changing over time. It would also entail another imposition of an ideal society at the cost of what *is*, which repeats the logic of colonialism. In other words, such impositions come at the cost of the actual lives that people are living, therefore, at the cost of the dignities, restraints, aspirations and creative efforts of living people now. The following quote from Walter D. Mignolo explains this problem:

De-coloniality [...] means working towards a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal society over those that differ, which is what modernity/coloniality does and, hence, where decolonization of the mind should begin. The struggle is for changing the terms in addition to the content of the conversation (Mignolo 2007:459).

Mignolo thus understands decolonisation as a structural change in the way we approach differences in societies and ways of life. Mignolo means that decolonisation starts with allowing different kinds of societies to exist alongside one another and to flourish without constructing difference in a hierarchical way. Imposing a forced return to a precolonial past on African societies then constitutes recolonisation in so far as it reintroduces an imposition of one ideal society onto different ones, an imposition of a single and necessarily partial, historically positioned and biased interpretation

of a long, dynamic and contested history of cultural change and exchange. A key feature of decolonisation of the African mind should thus be to resist this type of intolerance and erasure of difference. American feminist legal scholar Drucilla Cornell also makes this point. She understands the process of decolonisation to require the protection of the space for 'the rebirth of imagination' which makes it possible for the colonised to politically, ethically and culturally shape themselves as representatives of their own future, in resistance to the way colonisation captured their psychic and symbolic lives (Cornell 1998:156). What she thus emphasizes is how decolonisation calls for autonomy or self-creation on the part of Africans – a process which can only be hampered by ideological restrictions placed on this process in the name of dogmatic interpretations about pre-colonial African beliefs.

Similarly postcolonial scholars Mazrui and Tidy argue that instead of returning to a precolonial past, decolonisation should be 'a move towards renewed respect for indigenous ways and the conquest of cultural self-contempt' (Mazrui and Tidy 1984:283). It is thus not about moving back in time, but about reclaiming the future in new and imaginative ways rooted in a specific history. This process includes learning as much as is possible about the 'indigenous ways' that Mazrui and Tidy speak of, but also a resistance to uncritical reinstatements of such perceived ways on communities and individuals for whom they no longer make sense or carry significance. What is thus required is a critical and creative re-appropriation of an African past, or rather, of always ambiguous, dynamic and contested African *pasts*. It is therefore about rupturing the master narrative of Eurocentred history and creating a space for the telling of other histories, the creation of other accounts of the world and the space for imagining other futures that draw sustenance from African lived realities. In this context Canadian sociologist Eric Ritskes (2012) refers to the symbolism of the Akan Sankofa bird. For the Akan of Ghana 'sankofa' means 'it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind' and it is symbolised with a picture of the mythical sankofa bird that has its head turned backwards and taking an egg off its back. This conveys the importance of taking from the past knowledge that is good, and putting such knowledge to use to make positive progress in the present. This symbol captures strikingly the double movement of memory and imagination that decolonisation requires.

### **III Gender and colonisation in the Yorùbá society**

In her book, *Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí explores and analyses Yorùbá colonial history. She argues that central to British colonial domination in Yorùbá society (which lasted roughly from the late nineteenth century until 1960, as explained in the Chapter One) was the imposition of two separate but interrelated sets of hierarchical dichotomies, first that of settler against native and second that of man against woman (Oyěwùmí 1997:121). She shows how colonial practices in Nigeria not only posited the superiority of settler over the native, but also of the masculine over the feminine or man over woman (Oyěwùmí 1997:121). African women were at the bottom most rung of this hierarchy (Oyěwùmí 1997:153). She writes:

We can discern two vital and intertwined processes inherent to European colonization of Africa. The first and more thoroughly documented of these processes was the racializing and the attendant inferiorization of

Africans as the colonized, the natives. The second process [...] was the inferiorization of females. These processes were inseparable, and both were embedded in the colonial situation (Oyěwùmí 1997:152).

Oyěwùmí thus argues that to understand colonialism only in terms of race reveals only half of the picture and that the systematic oppression of women was integral in the processes of the dehumanisation of the colonised on the basis of race. In other words, for Oyěwùmí the process of inferiorising of the colonised was bound up with the process of enthroneing male hegemony. Oyěwùmí writes that 'male privilege is being naturalized and universalized as the order of things in the culture' and 'male dominance and Western dominance in Yorùbá society are entwined' (Oyěwùmí 2016:17). She shows the colonial restructuring of society, religion and history on the basis of gender to be one of the central ways in which the colonised were 'removed from their history' because it entailed such a deep transformation of 'the state of things' (Oyěwùmí 1997: 153). What she means here will become clearer as I continue to unpack her argument.

Importantly, as seen in the previous chapters already, Oyěwùmí does not merely argue that colonialism or Western domination installed unequal gender relations in Yorùbá society, she argues that woman was *created* in Yorùbá society by colonial systems of government and then systematically inferiorised. I highlighted in Chapter One that she argues that the words 'woman' and 'man' are mistranslations of the Yorùbá *obìnrin* and *òkùnrin* in so far as these words in Yorùbá do not refer to categories that are binarily opposed or hierarchical (Oyěwùmí 1997:32). Oyěwùmí writes:

In the Yorùbá conception, *òkùnrin* is not posited as the norm, the essence of humanity, against which *obìnrin* is the Other. Nor is *òkùnrin* a category of privilege. *Obìnrin* is not ranked in relation to *òkùnrin*; it does not have negative connotations of subordination and powerlessness, and, above all, it does not in and of itself constitute any social ranking (Oyěwùmí 1997:33).

Accordingly, for Oyěwùmí the term 'gender' as it is used in Western thought and feminist discourse inevitably connotes a dimorphic duality, thus two categories in relation to each other, often oppositionally constructed and this is what she rejects and denies to be the case among the Yorùbá (Oyěwùmí 2011: 225). It was seen in the previous chapters that Oyěwùmí argues that the cartesian split between body and mind that is central to the colonial/modern gender system is gendered, so that woman represents inert materiality and man is construed as a rational subject that transcends his embodiment. It was also seen that Oyěwùmí regards the gender duality of the colonial/modern gender system to be inevitably oppressive in so far as it is mapped onto a range of hierarchical dichotomies beginning with mind/body, but including also culture/nature, public/private etc. in terms of which the second and inferior terms are mapped onto the feminine, making of it the negative of the masculine who represents rational subjectivity. Accordingly, I read Oyěwùmí to argue that woman as an inherently inferior being that is the negative of man and which is confined to certain limited roles in society based on her anatomy, is what colonial rule created in Yorùbá society.

Oyěwùmí outlines two separate, but related processes through which this happened and is happening. The first process was the way in which colonial policies, laws and practices embedded in the patriarchal legal and social frameworks of

Western society directly entrenched the inferiority of females in the previously egalitarian Yorùbá society. The second process is the continued interpreting and analysing of Yorùbá society through a Western conceptual framework that assumes the existence of ‘woman’ and her inferiority. The first process played out during the period of formal colonisation of the Yorùbá society, while the second one, the analysing of Yorùbá society through a Western conceptual framework is one that both Western and African scholars (and especially feminists) are still guilty of today. It is the second process or practice that forms the focus of Oyěwùmí’s book as she attempts to reveal the limitations of Western ‘universals’ and to show the distortions these ‘universals’ effect when wrongfully applied to certain cultures. Oyěwùmí then attempts to write from within the lived reality of the Yorùbá people and to allow the local particularities of this local perspective to inform her theorising, rather than simply applying established ‘universals’ molded on Western truths.

*a) The creation and inferiorisation of woman through colonial practices and policies*

Regarding the first process mentioned above, namely the creation of gender and the systematic inferiorisation of women through colonial practices and policies, Oyěwùmí writes that the creation of ‘woman’ as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state (Oyěwùmí 1997:124). She argues that females in precolonial Yorùbá society had multiple identities that were not gendered or linked to their female anatomy (these could for example include farmer, hunter, mother, cook, warrior, ruler ‘all in one body’, as explained in the precious chapter). However, under colonial rule they were reduced to an identifiable legal category defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations (Oyěwùmí 1997:124). In other words, under colonial rule Yorùbá females were ‘categorized and reduced to “women”’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:124) in a way that froze them in a singular and clearly demarcated, predetermined identity.

Oyěwùmí outlines how the creation of woman and her subsequent erasure or subordination was central to the colonial reordering of all spheres of life. In other words, the effects of the reordering of gender relations extended beyond issues of reproduction, but defined labour, governance, trade and all other dimensions in the newly created colonial order. For Oyěwùmí this has a lot to do with the public/private divide that was and is so closely related to the man/woman dichotomy in the colonial/modern gender system. She argues that a major way in which the creation and subsequent subjection of woman was effected was by excluding females from the newly created colonial public sphere (Oyěwùmí 1997:123). She also explains how in precolonial Yorùbá society, like in many other African societies, the world was not characterised by the gendered public/private divide (Oyěwùmí 1997:123). Oyěwùmí calls the creation of the gendered public sphere the ‘hallmark and symbol of the colonial process’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:154).

Splitting society into a gendered public and private sphere had major consequences for governance of society, trade and labour in so far as it resulted in a hierarchical and gendered division of labour and the disqualification of females from roles and positions that they previously occupied, like rulers and traders. Splitting society into a gendered public and private sphere also had far reaching political implications. Oyěwùmí explains that the female chiefs were stripped

of power so that only men had political and public authority. Furthermore, similar to Falola and Heaton's point in Chapter One, Oyěwùmí writes that the scope of the authority of these male functionaries was also expanded to cover all areas of life, making it much more pervasive than the power of the traditional Yorùbá chiefs (Oyěwùmí 1997:125). The 'woman' created by colonialism was not regarded to be a legal subject and was thus reduced to legal minor in line with Victorian values (Oyěwùmí 1997:127). Accordingly, colonial systems of land reform and wage- and taxation systems entrenched men's power and women's subordination by only being aimed at and taking into account Yorùbá men, thereby changing Yorùbá society irrevocably.

Moreover, the Christian education system which targeted the African family system for reform, focused only on the education of men, because the church had a vested interest in producing mothers as purely domestic beings and caregivers who would be the foundation of Christian families (Oyěwùmí 1997:128-130). Christianity, the male dominant religion installed in Yorùbá society through colonialism from the 1840s onwards, also led to a reinterpretation of the indigenous Yorùbá religious system in a male-biased way (Oyěwùmí 1997:136-142). The previously gender neutral gods were masculinised and the feminine ones were stripped of their powers (Oyěwùmí 1997:141). The transcendence associated with divinity was therefore defined as a masculine attribute under colonial rule. Oyěwùmí writes further that '[t]he turning of a gender-free [Yorùbá] priesthood [...] into a Christian-type [male] priesthood is one concrete way in which patriarchy was institutionalized and imprinted in indigenous religion' (Oyěwùmí 2016:17). Oyěwùmí thus shows how the colonial imposition of the man/woman dichotomy on precolonial Yorùbá society deeply transformed all dimensions of Yorùbá life.

*b) The creation and inferiorisation of woman through processes of knowledge production*

Oyěwùmí makes the point that the process of distortion of Yorùbá society through the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system, is continued or repeated through processes of knowledge production today. She argues that by analysing a society through a conceptual or metaphysical framework that assumes the existence of gender categories, one creates such categories in that society (Oyěwùmí 1997:xv). Because of the dominance of the West in global knowledge production, even African scholarship that seeks to validate the specificity of the African experience does so within the frameworks of European-derived concepts and categories of knowledge, namely by assuming the inevitability and universality of the colonial/modern gender system (Oyěwùmí 1997:xv). In this way, both African and Western scholarship on Africa have contributed to creating gender in African societies, where it did not exist previously or existed in vastly different ways. Scholarship assuming the existence of gender categories has therefore been creating the realities that it has ostensibly only been describing. Oyěwùmí writes:

Since the colonial period, Yorùbá history has been reconstituted through a process of inventing gendered traditions. Men and women have been invented as social categories, and history is presented as being dominated by male actors. Female actors are virtually absent, and where they are recognized, they are reduced to exceptions (Oyěwùmí 1997:82).

One example of this ‘reconstitution of Yorùbá history through a process of inventing gendered traditions’ that Oyěwùmí deals with in detail is how political power was and is changed into a male prerogative in Yorùbá society through the process of recording Yorùbá history based on the male-privileging assumptions of the colonial/modern gender system and colonial/modern account of history. She discusses the dynastic lists of Yorùbá rulers (*alaafin*) that have featured in the work of various local and foreign historians. She explains that these lists show that male rulers were the norm and that female rulers were the exception (Oyěwùmí 1997:84). However, Oyěwùmí strongly disputes the accuracy of these lists on the basis of the fact that the non-gender-specificity of Yorùbá names, pronouns and social categories would have made it nearly impossible for these historians to identify the rulers as male, especially those that ruled before the nineteenth century for which there exist no written eyewitness accounts (Oyěwùmí 1997:84-85). Oyěwùmí notes that presenting all the *alaafin* as men leads to a projection of the power of rulers as something that is rooted in masculine properties (Oyěwùmí 1997:85). In this way female political rule and power is erased historically and conceptually. Political power becomes something gendered so that masculinity is partly defined by having political power, while femininity is partly defined by its absence.

Another way in which the gender-free framework of the Yorùbá is continuously erased according to Oyěwùmí, is through the gendered translations of gender neutral Yorùbá terms. Oyěwùmí explains in detail how Yorùbá is a non-gender specific language in so far as Yorùbá names and pronouns do not make gender distinctions. Only seniority is reflected in the language, in other words, pronouns indicate the relative seniority of the relevant persons and not the gender. Throughout her book Oyěwùmí argues this to be a reflection of the absence of gender categories in Yorùbá society. However, when Yorùbá is translated into English and thereby made to fit into the English grammar system, gender replaces relative seniority as main way of ordering or categorising persons. Moreover, gender is injected into Yorùbá discourse through the translation of the Yorùbá language into English where gender neutral terms like ‘*eniyán*’ which means ‘humans’ are translated into ‘man’ and the word ‘*omo*’ which means ‘child’ or ‘offspring’ is translated as ‘son’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:163). On an academic and societal level this leads to these words taking on new gendered meanings that they did not have before thus creating a new conceptual/metaphysical framework on the basis of which society is ordered.

A third way in which gender is created and sustained in Yorùbá society today is through the imposition of Western conceptual frameworks in the scholarly analysis of Yorùbá society. Oyěwùmí argues that despite its ‘radical local stance’ feminism (Western feminism, but also other feminisms that take their lead from Western feminism) ‘exhibits the same ethnocentric and imperialistic characteristics of the Western discourses it sought to subvert’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:13). Accordingly, despite Western feminism’s awareness of the dangers of universalising discourses, and its attempts to situate its knowledges in concrete realities of embodied women (as discussed in the Introduction), Oyěwùmí argues that it also makes itself guilty of projecting Western realities onto all societies. Oyěwùmí writes that feminism, like most other Western theoretical frameworks for interpreting the social world, fails to escape the paradigm in terms of which social hierarchies are perceived as natural (Oyěwùmí 1997: 11). She writes that feminism is a discourse that assumes the universality of its stances, despite the fact that the concerns and questions that have informed it are distinctly Western (Oyěwùmí 1997:13). Oyěwùmí makes this argument on the basis of the way in which most feminist



writings are rooted in the assumption of the universal existence of ‘women’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:15). The way in which this Western ‘truth’ is mostly uncritically accepted and shapes the knowledge produced about other cultures (regardless of their own indigenous gender constructions) ‘demonstrate[s] the hegemony of the West over other cultural groupings’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:15). She argues that Western feminism’s inability to see beyond Western constructions of the social world (and thus the universal existence of the category of ‘woman’) has the result that it interprets all other cultures in ways that provide ‘evidence’ for the universal existence of gender categories as they operate in the West (Oyěwùmí 1997: 11).

As explained in Chapter One, Oyěwùmí also illustrates the way in which Western feminism universalises Western gender categories and arrangements carefully with regard to the Western concept of ‘wife’. Oyěwùmí argues that Western feminism takes the nuclear family as point of departure, and as a result the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ are conflated. The notion of ‘woman’ that Western feminism uses as point of departure shares almost no similarities to the Yorùbá *obìnrin*, because ‘woman’ implies ‘wife’ and *obìnrin* does not. Oyěwùmí therefore attempts to show that when African realities are interpreted based on these Western frameworks, what we find are distortions, obfuscations in language and often a total lack of comprehension due to the incommensurability of social categories and institutions (Oyěwùmí 2002:7).

On this basis she argues that feminism remains enframed by the same ‘tunnel vision’ that characterises other Western discourses (Oyěwùmí 1997:13) and that it follows a ‘one-size-fits-all’ or ‘Western-size-fits-all’ approach to intellectual theorising (Oyěwùmí 1997:16). In this way alternative constructions of the world offered by other (non-Western) cultures are nullified (Oyěwùmí 1997: 11). Her point is therefore that Western feminism ‘overrides’ alternative gender arrangements by projecting the colonial/modern gender system onto all other worlds. Western feminism has internalised the modern unidirectional Eurocentric account of history in so far as it assumes that no alternative gender realities exist outside of the Western construction of gender. The knowledge produced about the Yorùbá by Western feminists (and those feminists who take their lead from Western feminism) therefore reflects the colonial/modern gender system and erases the alternative gender reality of the Yorùbá people.<sup>47</sup>

*c) An intermediate conclusion: gender and colonialism in Yorùbá society*

Oyěwùmí therefore shows in detail how colonialism imposed a gender system on Yorùbá society where such a system did not previously exist; how the creation of gender and the subjugation of woman is at the heart of the creation of the colonial society; and how these distortions are sustained in current day Yorùbá society on account of Western

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<sup>47</sup> In her criticism of Western feminism Oyěwùmí does not engage with Western feminists, like Judith Butler for example, who do question the universal existence of the category ‘woman.’ Her reading of Western feminism can therefore undoubtedly be criticised for being too generalising. However, her assertions that firstly, Western feminism (and feminisms from other places that take their lead from Western feminism) assumes the universal existence of man and woman, and secondly, that Western feminism generally does not engage with indications that alternative gender constructions are in place in other societies, remain true in broad terms. Although Oyěwùmí’s work would have been richer had she engaged with the Western feminists that are exceptions to the rule, her failure to do this does not render the overarching point she is making invalid.

dominance in knowledge production. She demonstrates how the gender division installed in the Yorùbá society through colonial policies and practices had consequences that went far beyond issues of sex and reproduction. The colonial creation and subjection of women in Yorùbá society played a central part in the irrevocable transformation of labour, trade, politics, governance, religion, history and education, a process through which Yorùbá people were subjugated as ‘natives’ (in opposition to the European subject) and removed from their own histories.

Oyěwùmí’s work indicates the man/woman dichotomy is a construct that belongs to the colonial/modern gender system. Her work shows ‘man’ and ‘woman’ to be categories that are defined by the specific geopolitical context of Eurocentric modernity and coloniality where man is a rational and autonomous subject while woman is his passive, embodied, dependent negative. Therefore, the creation of the colonial society in Yorùbáland required the transformation of colonised males and females into these dimorphous beings defined in terms of different sides of a set of hierarchical dichotomies according to the dichotomous logic of Western modernity. Accordingly, what comes to the fore in her argument is that colonialism and coloniality order the world in terms of a hierarchical and dichotomous logic that violently disrupts the fluidity and relationality of the Yorùbá reality. While the dichotomy of human/non-human is the most obvious dichotomy of colonialism and coloniality, it is interwoven or overlapping with the man/woman dichotomy and all the other dichotomies related thereto (public/private, culture/nature etc.). Through colonialism and coloniality this matrix of hierarchical dichotomies is then imposed onto the colonised society, dividing its world up into hierarchical oppositions. Oyěwùmí shows how this dichotomy of man/woman also overlapped with the introduction of the gendered public/private dichotomy in precolonial Yorùbá society which she refers to as the ‘hallmark and symbol of the colonial process’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:154). The public/private dichotomy worked along with the colonial man/woman dichotomy to radically change the Yorùbá society in spheres of labour, trade, governance, education and family. The dichotomies of culture/nature, mind/body and transcendence/immanence are all implied in Oyěwùmí’s discussions in so far as confining women to the private sphere while giving men access to the public sphere also reduced woman to provider of sex, vessel for reproduction and keeper of the flesh while man could engage in politics, trade and culture. I interpret Oyěwùmí to present colonialism and coloniality as a process through which the world of the Yorùbá was and is cut up into and reduced to hierarchical dichotomies of which man/woman is central and overlapping with all the others. In this way her work suggests that the colonial imposition of gender introduced a world view and a way of structuring the world that undercuts and works to destroy the fluidity and relationality of Yorùbá society. The colonial imposition of gender brought about a split between self and other, between spirit and matter, between mind and body and between public and private in a way that radically undercuts the subject-in-relation and the fluid non-dichotomous universe of precolonial Yorùbáland. I read her work to imply that the colonial imposition of gender in Yorùbá society had direct consequences in so far as women were removed from the public sphere and all public functions, but also more hidden and indirect consequences in so far as it injected Yorùbá society with a hierarchical and dichotomous construal of the subject and the world that continues to undercut the indigenous relational world sense.

Moreover, the way in which colonial modernity works to subalternise the histories and knowledges of the colonised is clearly reflected in Oyěwùmí’s description of the way in which the categories of the colonial/modern gender system

are continuously imposed on Yorùbá society through the writing of history, the translation of language and through (especially feminist) research on the Yorùbá. I explained above as well as in Chapter One how colonial modernity is argued to construct history in terms of unidirectional, linear progress, where Europe or the West is celebrated as the scene of the birth of the modern, while the rest of the world is regarded to present the pre-modern or the primitive. In this way all histories are reduced to subplots in the master narrative of the history of Europe. Oyěwùmí's analysis underscores this dynamics. I read her to illustrate powerfully that because the West or Europe is discursively constructed in hyperreal terms as the centre of history, it has the power to rewrite history into a single story. Her analysis shows how Western or European categories are presented as universal truths and norms that form the framework through which the Yorùbá society is interpreted. She shows how gender, a modern Western cultural construct that is elevated to a universal characteristic of human life and a universal social norm, is read into Yorùbá society in a way that erases the alternative local construction of the social. In this way she shows how colonial modernity works to erase multiplicity and to deny the co-evalness (being of the same age, existing at/in the same time) of other worlds. She shows how Yorùbá society is reduced to an inferior parody or mimicry of the West and is not approached as a different world that exists on its own and has its own history, knowledges and realities. In this regard it is relevant that Fanon wrote that colonialism did more than imposing its grammar and logic on the present and future of a dominated country and emptying the 'native's brain of all form and content,' but that '[b]y a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it' (Fanon 1961:67). This comes strikingly to the fore in Oyěwùmí's description of the way in which Yorùbá rulers are retroactively depicted as male (because this has been the modern Western norm) without any solid engagement with the local historical details to determine if this was indeed the case. Oyěwùmí therefore shows how Yorùbá history is rewritten to confirm and reinforce the modern Western view of the world.

I also explained in Chapter One that Chakrabarty (2000:8) argues that only Europe is theoretically knowable, in the sense that only Europe is regarded to be able to produce fundamental categories that shape historical thinking, while all other histories merely constitute data that confirm such European categories. It was seen above that Oyěwùmí shows how Yorùbá empirical data are not analysed as being capable of founding an independent or alternative history or theoretical position, but are rather distorted to serve as further 'proof' of Western theory or history. She demonstrates that Yorùbá social categories are forced into Western gender compartments (and because of their difference to the Western categories, regarded as inferior or distorted versions thereof), rather than being explored and theorised through a theoretical or conceptual framework that is rooted in and aligned with the specific cultural context. It was seen that Oyěwùmí regards feminism (Western as well as African feminisms that take the assumptions of Western feminism for granted), which uncritically universalises modern Western constructions of gender, to be particularly guilty of this. It was seen that she makes the point that even African scholarship that seeks to validate the specificity of the African experience is guilty of this because it assumes the inevitability and universality of the colonial/modern gender system.

#### IV The relation between gender, race and colonialism

I consider the work of Oyěwùmí to be original and significant in the African context where, as mentioned in the Introduction, feminist scholarship (Western and African) is often regarded as being recolonising rather than decolonising in so far as it serves Western agendas and is based on Western norms. Oyěwùmí's work on the relationship between gender and race in the colonisation of Yorùbá society can be argued to be a crucial and original intervention in the masculine biased discourses on decolonisation in African contexts. However, although she outlines significant aspects of the relationship of gender to colonial rule in Yorùbá society, she does not theorise and develop these thoughts in detail. She suggests a connection between gender, race and colonial power without dealing empirically or theoretically with the details thereof. As a result, her work raises many new questions which she does not engage with. Critical in this regard is what exactly the relationship is between the categories of gender and race in colonialism and coloniality and therefore how the hierarchical dichotomies of man/woman and human/non-human intersect, overlap or work together.

##### *a) A perspective from postcolonial feminist theory: Lugones and the coloniality of gender*

As mentioned before, I consider postcolonial feminist scholarship helpful in providing possible directions in which the connections between gender, race and colonialism in Oyěwùmí's work can be interpreted and fleshed out. There is a branch of postcolonial feminist scholarship that analyses the 'erotics of empire' or the 'carnal dynamics of white domination', as referred to by postcolonial scholar Greg Thomas (2007).<sup>48</sup> In the postcolonial scholarship on gender and colonialism scholars reconstruct, analyse and conceptualise gendered colonial pasts in a myriad ways that are not reducible to one central argument that captures the crux of the role of gender in colonial logic.<sup>49</sup>

In what follows I present the work of Argentinian feminist philosopher Maria Lugones as a way in which the connections between gender, race and colonial power have been approached. As already mentioned above, I specifically use Lugones because the way in which she connects gender, race and colonial power resonates with the connections that are implicit in the work of Oyěwùmí. Lugones (who approaches the topic of colonialism and gender in a general way, not based on a specific society) understands the construction of gender to be central to the production of racial categories. For her, the masculine/feminine distinction serves as a mark of civilisation so that becoming 'civilised' means internalising this distinction with all its concomitant norms and values. In other words, to be fully human means to fit into one side of this dichotomy and to act according to its prescriptions. In what follows I will show

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<sup>48</sup> This scholarship can be roughly divided into two categories, namely, first, literature on gender and colonialism generated by scholars of empire, who focus primarily on the power and hegemony of the imperial state including the realms of the intimate (see for example Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* [1995]). Second, the literature developed by area-based scholars, who have tended to foreground local, subaltern agency and the episodic, uneven nature of imperial rule (for example the collection of essays discussing gender and colonial rule in numerous African countries: Allman, J., Geiger, S. & Musisi, N, [eds.] [2002]). This distinction is made by Burton and Allman (2008:200).

<sup>49</sup> Burton and Allman provide a comprehensive overview of many of the important texts in an article in which they reflect on the graduate seminar 'Gender and Colonialism' that they taught at the University of Illinois: Burton, A & Allman, J. 2008. Gender, Colonialism, and Feminist Collaboration. *Radical History Review*, 101:198-210.

how this argument connects in important ways to Oyěwùní's argument that the creation of the category 'woman' was a decisive step in the colonial process of reducing Yorùbá people to 'natives.'<sup>50</sup>

Lugones understands colonialism and coloniality to operate through a dichotomous paradigm which it imposes on the world and through which it reduces certain categories of persons to the negative others of subjectivity. She writes that coloniality is the 'powerful reduction of human beings to animals, to inferiors by nature, in a schizoid understanding of reality that dichotomizes the human from nature, the human from the non-human' (Lugones 2010: 751). In this way the colonised is at the same time both a being that is in a (precolonial) world of meaning without dichotomies, and the 'beast' who stands in opposition to the human in the colonial regime (Lugones 2010: 751). She reads Oyěwùní and postcolonial scholars such as American cultural anthropologist Irene Silberblatt (1990; 1998), American cultural historian Carolyn Dean (2001), Mexican scholar Maria Esther Pozo (Pozo and Ledezma 2006), Latin American anthropologist Pamela Calla, English scholar of development and environment Nina Laurie (2006), and Mexican feminist critical epistemologist Sylvia Marcos (2006), to confirm the point that gender is a colonial imposition in so far as it imposes itself on life as lived in tune with cosmologies, metaphysics or philosophies incompatible with the colonial/modern logic of dichotomies (Lugones 2010: 748). Oyěwùní writes herself also that 'there were many cultures around the world in which gender categorization and male dominance were absent originally' (Oyěwùní 2016:12).

Lugones regards the man/woman dichotomy to be inextricably connected with the human/non-human dichotomy central to colonialism and coloniality. She explains that through colonisation a hierarchical, dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonised in service of Western man (Lugones 2010:743). She argues this human/non-human to be the central dichotomous hierarchy of colonial modernity and regards it to be dependent on and interwoven with the masculine/feminine dichotomy. According to Lugones the distinction between man and woman became that which marks the human (in opposition to the non-human) (Lugones 2010:743). She writes: '[o]nly the civilized are men and women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species - as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild' (Lugones 2010:743). The categories of man and woman have very specific meanings which form the yardstick for being human. The European bourgeois, colonial man was regarded to be an active agent, a being of civilisation and reason and the European bourgeois woman was passive, sexually pure, home bound and in the service of the white European, bourgeois man. This hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human became a normative tool to damn the colonised: '[t]he behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful' (Lugones 2010:743). According to this model only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women

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<sup>50</sup> Another postcolonial feminist scholar whose work could be similarly helpful in interpreting Oyěwùní is Ann Stoler. Stoler's work on the Netherlands Indies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth turns on the premise that the discursive management of the sexual practices of coloniser and colonised was fundamental to the colonial order. In her book *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002) she argues in many different ways and on many different levels that discourses of sexuality classified colonial subjects into distinct human kinds. For Stoler sexual prescriptions delineated racial categories, so that the racial category of whiteness was inseparable from conformation to certain sexual norms (which were vastly different for men and women).

in Western descriptions (Lugones 2007:202). Females excluded from the definition of woman were sexually marked as female, but they did not have the characteristics of femininity (fragile, weak, secluded in the private and sexually passive) because they were characterised by sexual aggression and perversion and regarded to be strong enough for any kind of labour (Lugones 2007:203). When colonised females were civilised through a process of colonisation they were turned from animals into various modified and inferior versions of 'women' and thus 'similes of bourgeois white women' (Lugones 2007:203).<sup>51</sup> The process of 'civilising the native' was therefore not only a racial one, but a deeply sexual and gendered one. Lugones makes the point that the 'long process of subjectification of the colonized toward adoption/internalization of the men/women dichotomy as a normative construction of the social - a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society - was and is constantly renewed' (Lugones 2010:748).

On this basis Lugones argues that understanding the place of gender in precolonial societies is pivotal to understanding the nature and scope of changes in the social structure that the processes constituting colonial/modern Eurocentred capitalism imposed (Lugones 2007:201). The way in which colonised women were inferiorised through slow and heterogenous processes is crucial to the disintegration of communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making and authority and economies of colonised societies (Lugones 2007:201-202). Lugones's aim is then to reveal how the gender structures which are still in place today subjugate both women and men in postcolonial/neocolonial societies in all domains of existence and that the transformation of gender relations is central to resist and dismantle Western hegemony and to restore, cultivate and develop subjectivities, cultures and traditions ravaged and erased by colonialism and eurocentred capitalism (Lugones 2007:189).

#### *b) Oyěwùmí and Lugones: a synthesis*

In what follows I highlight the overarching similarities between Lugones's theory and Oyěwùmí's theory and I show how Lugones's work could help to add nuance to Oyěwùmí's argument, because Lugones more comprehensively works out the details of the relationship between race and gender in the functioning of colonial power. Importantly, it is not that I am merely applying Lugones's theory to Oyěwùmí's data. I suggest that the points that Lugones is making can be argued to be implicit in Oyěwùmí's work already, but that Oyěwùmí does not theorise them explicitly. In this regard it is important to note, as mentioned above, that Lugones makes her claims based on her reading of the work of many non-Western scholars who argue that gender was a colonial imposition in their societies. Oyěwùmí is one of the scholars she reads. Accordingly, Lugones's theory also flows from, finds sustenance in, and is informed by Oyěwùmí's theory. Arguing like I do that Lugones can help to work out and make explicit certain conceptual links in Oyěwùmí's theory therefore does not imply a one-sided relationship between them at all. It is rather that Lugones's work, which is

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<sup>51</sup> However, despite using the hierarchical gender dichotomy as a judgment, the gendering of the colonised (and thereby turning the colonised into human beings) was not a colonial goal (Lugones 2010:744). The normative judgment served therefore mostly as a justification of abuse. Lugones writes that 'If the colonial 'civilizing mission' was the euphemistic mask of brutal access to people's bodies through unimaginable exploitation, violent sexual violation, control of reproduction, and systematic terror (feeding people alive to dogs or making pouches and hats from the vaginas of brutally killed indigenous females, for example)' (Lugones 2010:744).

informed by the work of Oyěwùmí (among others) is helpful to, in turn, enhance Oyěwùmí's theory by deepening her argumentation.

It was seen above that Oyěwùmí regards colonialism and coloniality to imply an imposition of a dichotomous reality onto the world in terms of which some persons are regarded as human and others not. She also understands the man/woman dichotomy to play a central role in this scheme. In this respect Lugones's theory resonates strongly with Oyěwùmí's theory. Lugones also thinks of colonialism and coloniality as a dichotomous regime that imposes itself on the non-dichotomous reality of the colonised. She argues that modernity organises the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogenous and separable categories and shows how woman and man are two such categories (that are of central importance in the dichotomous scheme) where woman is the passive and material other to active and rational man. The theories of Oyěwùmí and Lugones regarding the functioning of colonial logic and the role of gender therein, are in this sense perfectly aligned.

Oyěwùmí argues that the creation of man and woman in terms of colonial/modern standards is the first step in 'civilising' (and subjugating) the 'native' in precolonial Yorùbá society. However, she never makes explicit how exactly she understands race and gender to be connected in the colonial oppression and disruption of Yorùbá society. She says that the creation and subjugation of woman and the subjugation of the native are two inseparable processes, and she shows how the imposition of the man/woman dichotomy in Yorùbá society is central to the creation of the colony, but she does not explain this link on a theoretical level. Lugones's theorising of the male/female dichotomy as a normative construction of the social that serves and is part of colonial/modern power structures, therefore presents a possible way of understanding in more detailed terms the exact role of gender in colonial logic. I explained above that Lugones argues that under colonial modernity, living the masculine/feminine dichotomy is a mark of civilisation or being fully human, so that persons with sexuate identities that fall outside of this opposition are regarded as primitive and non-human. Oyěwùmí's statement that 'woman' is a colonial creation in Yorùbá society could then be interpreted to refer to the way in which men and women were produced in Yorùbá society through the normative colonial construction of the social in terms of which the man/woman dichotomy was a mark of civilization and a requirement for citizenship and membership in civil society. Lugones's work also highlights the significance of Oyěwùmí's way of understanding gender as inherently a dichotomy and a hierarchy and the category of woman as inherently the inferior and negative of man. She shows that the hierarchical relationship between man and woman is not merely a random and unfortunate socio-economic arrangement, but that it is a central fixture of the way in which colonial modernity organises the world.

Lugones's theory could also help to add nuance to Oyěwùmí's point that the effects of the colonial imposition of the man/woman dichotomy lead to the deep disruption and radical transformation of Yorùbá society on all levels (rather than just impacting the spheres of family and reproduction). Oyěwùmí shows in concrete terms how this plays out in the domains of trade, labour, religion and the social, by showing how the creation and inferiorisation of women and their removal from the public sphere led to a deep disruption of all societal structures and systems in Yorùbáland.

She also makes the point that in this way Yorùbá people were ‘removed from their histories’ and that the creation of woman led to a fundamental transformation of the ‘state of things’ (Oyěwùmí 1997: 153). I regard it to be implicit in her work that it has to do with the disruption of the egalitarian fluidity and relationality of precolonial Yorùbá society through the imposition of a hierarchical and dichotomous structuring of the world. A good example of this is the way in which Oyěwùmí argues that through the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system reduced the mother or *Iya* to the inferior, limited and essentialised category of wife, which exists as negative other to man. It was seen in Chapter One (and will be further discussed in Chapter Five) that in precolonial Yorùbá society the identity of *Iya* encompassed ‘multiplicity of possibilities for social categorization’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:161) and defied the fixed categories of gender. Accordingly, when the Yoruba mother becomes a wife under colonial policies and ideologies, it constitutes the reduction of a fluid and plural identity to a fixed and limited position on one side of a hierarchical dichotomy, in the name of ‘civilisation’. It was seen that Lugones argues that the colonial/modern gender structures which are still in place today subjugate both women and men in postcolonial societies in all domains of existence in so far as, in the framework of colonial modernity, being human, civilised or being a citizen of the modern world requires the internalisation of the man/woman dichotomy. Striving to become a man or woman under colonial rule or coloniality therefore constitutes the internalisation of a dichotomous logic through which the colonised is reduced to a non-human or a ‘native’ as opposed to the European subject. In this way, Lugones argues, the internalisation of the dichotomous logic of colonial modernity disrupts the communal relations, cosmologies and social structures of the colonised.

Oyěwùmí’s analysis of the effects of the colonial imposition of gender on Yorùbá society on political, economic, societal and religious levels, illustrates exactly this in concrete terms. If one uses Lugones’s theory to fill in the details in Oyěwùmí’s argument, Oyěwùmí’s point that the creation of gender in Yorùbá society transformed the state of things and removed people from their histories can be read to refer to the way in which the colonial imposition of gender led to a disruption of the self-in-relation in so far as it required and enforced an internalisation of a dichotomous view of the world and the subject in terms of which difference and otherness means less than. It therefore constitutes an internalisation of a framework in terms of which the Western man is the subject par excellence and woman as well as the African is his other. It is a framework in terms of which the Yorùbá person is reduced to the native on the basis of its difference from the white man and in terms of which Yorùbá histories, cosmologies and knowledges are subalternised and banned to an ‘elsewhere’ or premodernity. Read like this, it becomes even clearer on what basis Oyěwùmí argues that the imposition of this dichotomous logic and particularly the dichotomy of man/woman worked to erase Yorùbá histories, cultures, cosmologies and religion, and to irrevocably transform Yorùbá society on all levels (including trade, labour, politics and family) into something that was not recognisable anymore. It becomes clearer on what basis the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system on precolonial Yorùbá society still has devastating effects that extend far beyond issues of sex and reproduction and profoundly affects persons of all genders.

## V Conclusion

The work of Oyěwùmí, especially when read in conjunction with scholars like Lugones, thus shows that African feminism has a crucial role to play in the process of decolonisation of African societies in so far as gender is an



imposition of colonialism and coloniality which permeates all domains of life and leads to the subjugation of both colonised men and women. Her work shows that the racialisation and inferiorisation of the 'native' cannot be fully grasped and appreciated if the role of sexualisation as central aspect to the logic of colonialism is ignored. Oyěwùmí's work reveals how the violent inferiorisation of women is central to the oppressive social structures imposed on the Yorùbá society by colonial modernity. A project of decolonisation therefore calls for a rejection of the gender system imposed on African societies through colonialism and coloniality, based on the awareness of the co-constitutive nature of race and gender in the colonial/modern gender system. On this basis it could be said that the African scholars writing on decolonisation without engaging with the role of gender in colonisation and coloniality are not seeing the full picture. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that the main weakness of the emancipatory projects in Africa so far is that they do not question the core logic of Western modernity that constructed a racialised, hierarchical, hegemonic, patriarchal and capitalist global social system (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:4). Oyěwùmí shows how gender is an essential part of this core logic. The omission of African scholars and politicians to question and engage with the issue of gender is thus part of the failure to question the core logic of Western modernity. The feminist project of Oyěwùmí constitutes an invaluable intervention in this regard and her work highlights the necessity of further feminist projects revealing, analysing and resisting the ways in which gender structures, dynamics and constructions serve coloniality in African societies.

In so far as Oyěwùmí works to reveal and dismantle the colonial/modern power matrix in which gender is embedded in Yorùbá society, as well as the way in which the existing gender structures serve Western power and influence in African societies, she is doing crucial work in opening up a space for the reimagining of Yorùbá cultures and futures in a way that contests the master narrative of Eurocentric history in which African histories and cultures are erased. By arguing that Yorùbá people cannot and should not be understood through the framework of the colonial/modern gender system, which is a framework that creates certain kinds of subjects, and by revealing the workings of this framework in Yorùbá society, she is opening a space in which the resubjectification of African people in line with their own histories, values and cultures can happen. It is thus also an act of regaining control over self-definition of African people. Importantly, Oyěwùmí is retrieving, reclaiming or reconstructing a buried past and in this way she is creating counter-epistemologies of alterity on the basis of memory. However, this does not mean that it is necessary to read her project as implying that it is necessary to return to a precolonial past. What is more important is that she is activating or harnessing memory to create a space for creative imagining of new futures which are not possible in the confines of the colonial power matrix. By de-universalising gender and revealing its role in the establishment and maintenance of colonialism and coloniality, Oyěwùmí is opening a space for creating accounts of histories and realities exterior to colonial modernity. In this way she is working to displace Europe or the West as locus of epistemic enunciation. Oyěwùmí can therefore be said to be thinking from difference towards the constitution of alternative local worlds. What one sees in her work is the working of an 'insurgent memory' (Zegeye and Vambe 2006:343-344) which looks in the unconscious (that which is imposed upon and repressed by Eurocentric accounts of history) of Yorùbá culture to create a counter-discourse of resistance and to reveal contradictory identities. In this way her work also conclusively refutes discourses understanding all attempts to transform gender relations in African societies as inherently opposed to African culture.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# IRIGARAY AND OYĒWÙMÍ IN DIALOGUE ABOUT THE SACRIFICIAL METAPHYSICS OF THE WESTERN SYMBOLIC ORDER

## I Introduction

In this chapter I take a closer look at the dichotomous logic of the colonial/modern gender system which Oyĕwù mí claims was imposed on Yorùbá society through colonialism and coloniality. In the previous three chapters it was shown how Oyĕwù mí can be read to argue that the fluid and non-dichotomous order of Yorùbá society has been distorted through the continued imposition of the colonial/modern gender system. The main characteristic that she ascribes to this system is that it constructs difference, and importantly also gender difference, in hierarchical dichotomous terms, thereby creating a society that is constituted by hierarchical gendered oppositions. In this chapter I explore this oppressive logic further by looking at Luce Irigaray's metaphysical analysis of the Western patriarchal order. Irigaray's work is helpful for this purpose because her diagnosis of the colonial/modern gender system largely overlaps with the arguments of Oyĕwù mí. Like Oyĕwù mí, Irigaray argues that Western society and thought are unable to make sense of gender difference and difference in general. This argument is not unique in Western feminist scholarship, but what distinguishes Irigaray's approach is that she traces this problem to the founding metaphysical gestures of Western thought. She offers a critique of the 'structure of [Western] patriarchal thought' (Whitford 1991:103). Working from within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Irigaray argues that the Western symbolic order<sup>52</sup> is founded on the forgetting, or erasure of the maternal feminine, which represents matter. This means that culture, philosophy, language, religion and the subject are not gender neutral, but implicitly masculine. Unlike Lacan, who takes this particular discursive organisation to be ahistorical and unchangeable, Irigaray asks what the conditions are for the undoing of the burial of the maternal feminine and the emergence of a feminine subject. In her work Irigaray then envisions the possibility of an alternative to the patriarchal Western symbolic order.

In this chapter I thus explore from a Western feminist perspective and on a metaphysical level the charge that Oyĕwù mí levels against the colonial/modern gender system, namely that it is on a metaphysical or conceptual level unable to deal with difference and construes difference in hierarchical dichotomous terms. Irigaray's fundamental analysis of the metaphysical presuppositions underlying Western patriarchy will provide us with a better idea of what the colonial/modern gender system entails and how it operates. In this way her work bolsters and could be used to strengthen the critique of Oyĕwù mí of the colonial/modern gender system imposed on precolonial Yorùbá society. Moreover, I show in what ways the alternatives that Irigaray formulates to Western patriarchal culture overlap with Oyĕwù mí's description of precolonial Yorùbá society. In this way Irigaray's work provides a metaphysical explanation for the gender equivalence that Oyĕwù mí argues to have characterised precolonial Yorùbá society.

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<sup>52</sup> This is a vital Lacanian concept which Whitford explains as 'the order of discourse and meaning, the order into which all human beings have to insert themselves and which therefore precedes and exceeds individual subjectivity' (Whitford 1991:90).

In this chapter I also show how reading Irigaray and Oyěwùmí together highlights important strengths and weaknesses in both their work. This is done firstly by showing that, although Irigaray's theory is helpful to deepen Oyěwùmí's critique of the colonial/modern gender system, Oyěwùmí's work reveals a significant limitation of Irigaray's theory, namely that she fails to take into account how gender and race are inextricably intertwined in the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order. Secondly I explore the significance of the overlaps and divergences in the understanding of subjectivity found in their respective theories and I show how both theories enrich each other. Lastly I explore the issue of sexual heteronormativity that looms in both Oyěwùmí and Irigaray's work and I present a critical comparison of their approaches.

The aim of this chapter is therefore also to show how productive it can be to place African and Western feminists in dialogue with one another. It implies that African feminism as well as Western feminism remain all the poorer for not engaging with each other's perspectives and viewpoints. By reading Oyěwùmí alongside Irigaray in this dissertation I am therefore making a case for the potential of such cross-continental dialogues and the new meaning that can emerge from them.

This chapter starts in the next section with an overview of Irigaray's arguments regarding the metaphysical underpinnings of the Western symbolic order. In the third section there follows an explanation of how Irigaray thinks this order can be shifted. In section four, the insights that reading Oyěwùmí alongside Irigaray produces regarding Oyěwùmí's critique of the colonial/modern gender system are outlined. Lastly, sections five, six and seven explore the strengths and weaknesses in the work of Oyewumi and Irigaray regarding race, subjectivity and sexual multiplicity that come to the fore when reading them together.

## **II Irigaray's diagnosis of the Western symbolic order**

Irigaray criticises Western culture for forgetting sexual difference. She argues that in Western society the seemingly 'neutral' position of gender equality can be said to be modeled on an idealised masculine subjectivity, and requires that women denounce that which makes them different from men. This means that man sets the standard for sex equality, and that equality includes occupying a similar position to man. This is because man serves as the standard for being human as such and therefore society is shaped in accordance with his needs and capabilities (Irigaray 1994:63). Accordingly, labour, production, human rights and politics, among other things, serve the needs of men while claiming to be of universal application. Irigaray writes that 'family [...], school, work, business, the state, information systems and most forms of recreation are organized according to male economy and law' (Irigaray 1994:7) and that '[s]ociety and culture operate according to male models' (Irigaray 1994:8). Therefore, in Western patriarchal society and thought the neutral position is never neutral, but always already sexuated. Irigaray refers in this regard to the 'delusion' of neutrality (Irigaray 1994:62). She writes:

The pretext of the neutral individual does not pass the reality test: women get pregnant, not men; women and little girls are raped, boys very rarely; the bodies of women and girls are used for involuntary prostitution and pornography, those of men infinitely less; and so on (Irigaray 1994:59).

These crucial differences are not factored into the understanding of the human being around which society is structured and laws and policies are made. In fact, the very idea of the human fails to incorporate sexual difference and the sexed body. Women are treated as exceptions or deviations from the standard human being. It is only as men that women can come into today's systems of power (Irigaray 1993a:67). In other words, women have to become (like) men in order to be allowed to act and speak in the political and social structures and in order to claim the same rights and privileges as men (Irigaray 1993b:12). Irigaray argues that the rights that women have gained through women's movements mostly 'enable them to slip into men's skin, to take on the so-called male identity' (Irigaray 1994:79).

a) *The metaphysical gestures, logic and structures underlying this system*

Irigaray is interested in exposing how this oppressive system came about and why this system is so resilient. In order to answer these questions, she traces Western patriarchy to its metaphysical roots. She shows how the inequality that women suffer on socio-political levels in Western society is rooted in a specific metaphysical or symbolic system that underpins society. In her earlier work, she analyses some key texts in the dominant Western philosophical tradition to reveal and explore this symbolic system. Philosophy in this stage of her work<sup>53</sup> forms 'the discourse that lays down the law to the others' and accordingly it is the philosophical order that has to be 'questioned' and 'disturbed' in order to effect change in society (Irigaray 1985b:159). Whitford explains in this regard that for Irigaray the gesture which excludes women from philosophy and the gesture which excludes women from the polis are one and the same (Whitford 1991:102). Transforming the unequal gender relations in Western society therefore requires more than socio-political action, but transformation on a metaphysical or symbolic level as well. Similarly, Halsema explains that Irigaray regards philosophy as an instrument for bringing about change in society in so far as society is shaped by philosophy or the symbolic structures articulated by philosophy (Halsema 1998:71). Irigaray then analyses (using psychoanalytical tools) the dominant Western philosophical discourse, starting with Plato, to show that sexual difference is interpreted in this discourse as if there were only one sex, namely man, while woman is reduced to his negative. Through a close reading of many philosophers that are dominant in the Western philosophical discourse, she argues that the culture, identity, logic and rationality of Western culture are symbolically male and that the female is

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<sup>53</sup> Irigaray's work is commonly understood to be divided into three phases, which she describes in an interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary Olsen (1995). She explains that the first phase of her work (which includes her books *Speculum of the Other Woman* [1985a] and *This sex that is not one* [1985b] among others) is the critical phase in which she indicated how 'a single subject, traditionally the masculine subject, had constructed the world and interpreted the world according to a single perspective' (Hirsh and Olsen 1995:97). The second phase was aimed at identifying the conditions that would allow for the emergence of a feminine subject. In the third phase in her work she pursued the construction of a relationship or 'intersubjectivity' between the sexes in which sexual difference is respected (Hirsh and Olsen 1995:97). This would include works like *I love to you* (1996). Halsema (1998: 66) explains that whereas in her early work, she concentrated upon philosophy for her aim of creating a culture of sexual difference, in later works she concentrates mainly on language and law in her pursuit of changing Western culture (for a more detailed discussion of this see Halsema [1995: 65-68]).

either the ‘outside, the hole, or the unsymbolizable residue’ (Whitford 1991: 69). Whitford refers to Irigaray’s project as an attempt to ‘rewrite the script of Western civilization’ (Whitford 1991: 102).

Central to Irigaray’s understanding of the metaphysical foundations of modern Western patriarchy is that in the Western symbolic order, there is a symbolic division between, on the one hand, the material, corporeal, sensible and ‘natural’ which are allocated to the feminine and coded feminine and on the other hand the spiritual, ideal, intelligible which are allocated to the masculine and coded masculine. The symbolic is constituted in relation to disembodied ideals and emerges through the exclusion of a constitutive outside consisting of that which is material, corporeal, sensible, natural and coded feminine. On this basis Irigaray writes that the Western patriarchal order is ‘founded upon a sacrifice: of nature, of the sexed body, especially of women’ (Irigaray 1987: 191). Irigaray symbolises this exclusion as a symbolic matricide which she identifies in many founding texts of the Western symbolic order, most famously in Plato’s cave myth.<sup>54</sup>

In *Politeia*, book VII, Plato presents the cave myth, as told by Socrates, as an allegory for the relation between the sensible world and the world of Ideas. Socrates describes a group of people who have lived chained to a wall of a cave all of their lives. They are facing a blank wall and they watch projections of shadows on the wall, which come from things passing in front of a fire behind them. This is the only reality these prisoners know until they are freed from the cave and they learn to discern between true reality and mere shadows or projections. Plato compares this to the philosopher who learns to look further than the world of earthly appearances to see the world of Ideas. Irigaray reads this cave to be the matrix/womb which the philosopher must leave behind to move toward the Sun/Idea in an ‘erasure of beginning’ (Irigaray 1985a:312). Whitford explains that in Irigaray’s interpretation of the myth, the cave and the Idea represent the imaginary mother and father respectively (Whitford 1991:108). The prisoner moves away from the materiality of the mother as place of birth, change and becoming towards the timeless father to whom absolute being is attributed. In the process the role of the mother as co-engenderer is stripped away and the father is posited as being beyond all beginnings (Irigaray 1985a:307). The path through which the prisoner moves out of the cave towards the light of day is forgotten (Irigaray 1985a:247). The forgetting of the ‘path that links two “worlds”’ leads to the ‘founding’ or ‘hardening’ of all ‘dichotomies, categorical differences, clear-cut distinctions, absolute discontinuities, all the confrontations of the irreconcilable representations’ (Irigaray 1985a:247). In this way all differences between the two ‘worlds,’ the world of the cave and the world beyond the cave are reduced to dichotomies with no in-between and with the cave (and therefore the feminine) always representing the inferior pole. Irigaray refers to dichotomies of oppositions between:

The ‘world outside’ and the ‘world inside,’ between the ‘world above’ and the ‘world below.’ Between the light of the sky and the fire of the earth. Between the gaze of the man who has left the cave and that of the prisoner. Between truth and shadow, between truth and fantasy, between ‘truth’ and whatever ‘veils’ the truth.

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<sup>54</sup> See also *The Bodily Encounter with the Mother* (1991a) in which Irigaray reinterprets the myth of Clytemnestra to show how patriarchy is founded on the sacrifice of the bond between mothers and daughters.

Between reality and dream. Between ... Between.... Between the intelligible and the sensible. Between good and evil. The One and the many. Between anything you like. All oppositions that assume the *leap* from a worse to a better (Irigaray 1985a:247-248),

Irigaray therefore reads into Plato's cave myth the construction of an order that is established through an implicit division of labour between the Intelligible and its material and sensible conditions of existence which are ascribed to the Father and Mother respectively (Whitford 1991:109). It is an order in which difference is constructed in binary terms with no inbetween. And it is an order that is dependent on the exclusion of the (m)other, which serves as its buried or forgotten material support. Walker refers to Plato's cave myth as an 'ideological and a rhetorical device that structures femininity as the marginal and unacknowledged support of the philosophical enterprise' (Walker 1998:9). For Caldwell this means that concepts and the notion of truth, like subjectivity are constituted through a 'sacrificial logic' in so far as it is dependent on the sacrifice of multiplicity, change and the sensible (Caldwell 2002). The Western philosophical enterprise is thus founded on a fundamental reversal in terms of which the fleshy beginnings of man are turned into a mere repetition, representation or figuration, while the Idea represents true being and 'constitutes itself as matrix' (Irigaray 1985a:253). Accordingly, the generative power of the mother is appropriated and projected onto the Idea. In this way the subject 'turns his back on any beginning that is still empirical, still too material and matrical, and he receives being only from the one who wills himself as origin without beginning' (Irigaray 1985a:295). Subjectivity is therefore cut loose from its material beginnings and defined exclusively with reference to a disembodied and self-generating ideal.

For Irigaray, Plato's cave myth shows how Western thought has repressed its origin or material foundations. This metaphysical matricide manifests in, religion (where God is considered as the Father and origin) and also culture (where the father has replaced the mother as a place of becoming) (Halsema 1998:54). Du Toit explains that according to Irigaray, patriarchy is then established through 'an (almost total) erasure or "murder" of the mother, the womb and the matter on which patriarchal structures and symbolic universes nevertheless remain dependent' (Du Toit 2009:159). In terms of this scheme the mother cannot be represented, rather her 'non-representation or even disavowal upholds the absolute being attributed to the father' (Irigaray 1985a:307). She is the 'origin of the visible' and thereby 'escapes representation' and is 'in excess of any identification of presence' (Irigaray 1985a:307). The undifferentiated maternal-feminine underlies 'all possibility of determining identity' (Irigaray 1993a: 98) and the maternal body is the 'formless, "amorphous" origin of all morphology' (Irigaray 1985a:265). In other words, by representing the natural, the material, the corporeal and the sensible she provides the material grounding or basis for representation and for the symbolic universe, which disables or excludes the possibility of herself being symbolically represented in this order. Whitford explains that Irigaray ultimately deals in her work only with this single problem, namely the exclusion of woman from the symbolic/social order and her representation as nature or inert materiality (Whitford 1991:170). This problem is reworked and thought through a variety of discursive formulations and in relation to a wide range of different conceptual systems (Whitford 1991:170). The Western symbolic order, where the sensible is cut off from the intelligible, is therefore deeply dependent on the exclusion of woman. However, this dependency remains unacknowledged or is forgotten. Irigaray writes that '[t]he entire male economy demonstrates a forgetting of life, a

lack of recognition of debt to the mother, of maternal ancestry, of the women who do the work of producing and maintaining life' (Irigaray 1994:7).<sup>55</sup>

*b) Sexual difference and subjectivity*

Irigaray also shows in detail how the fact that the Western symbolic is founded in a symbolic matricide has radical implications for subjectivity. The Western patriarchal order which is dependent on the exclusion of the feminine allows only for the symbolic representation of masculinity. In this order subjectivity is masculine and the feminine subject does not exist except as same, opposite or complement to man. Subjectivity is posited in opposition to, and to be achieved through the transcendence of, the material and the particular which is projected onto the feminine (Irigaray 1985a:133). Irigaray writes:

In the system of production that we know, including that of sexual production, men are distanced from their bodies. They have relied upon their sex, their language and their technology to go on and on building a world further and further removed from their relation to the corporeal. But they are corporeal. They therefore need to reassure themselves that someone really is looking after the body for them. Their women or wives are guardians of their corporeal unity (Irigaray 1991: 49).

Accordingly, the splitting off of the intelligible from the sensible in the Western symbolic order also plays out in the construction of subjectivity. Subjectivity is understood as that which transcends the flesh. Woman as giver of birth represents material embodiment in this order and as a result it is woman who is burdened with the embodiment of both sexes. She becomes '[a] body-object which is there, which does not move, which he can go back to whenever he likes' (Irigaray 1991: 49). Man on the other hand, can forget his embodiment and claim subjectivity and transcendence. Irigaray writes further:

Subjectivity denied to woman: indisputably this provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire. [...] for he can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness, some objective. If there is no more 'earth' to press down / repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one's own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the ex-sistence of the 'subject'? (Irigaray 1985a:133).

In other words, Irigaray argues that woman has been relegated to the order of the material, the changing and the natural ('earth'), which functions as the foil for the emergence of an unchanging, disembodied, universal (but implicitly

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<sup>55</sup> Irigaray also shows how the sacrificial logic that she identifies in Western metaphysics plays out on a political level in the system of liberal democracy. Irigaray argues that liberal democracy participates in this sacrificial matrix in so far as modern liberalism insists that difference must be suppressed for individuals to become citizens. The ideal citizen is construed with reference to the formation of the abstract ideal of equality in terms of which the many is always subjugated to the One and difference is hierarchised with reference to the singular (masculine) subject (Caldwell 2002: 20).

masculine) subjectivity. Caldwell explains this by saying that the universal, disembodied subject of modern Western thought is dependent on the inferior, repressed and forgotten existence of the material and particular other for its unity and coherence (Caldwell 2002:21). Irigaray writes further that '[w]oman-as-other' occupies the position of 'natural substratum' in the patriarchal social construction (Irigaray 1993b:45). The feminine represents the "'[m]atter" upon which he [the "universal" masculine subject] will ever and again return to plant his foot in order to spring farther, leap higher' (Irigaray 1985a:134). In other words, the 'universal subject', which presents itself as being gender neutral, is in fact modeled on an idealised, disembodied conception of masculine subjectivity which is made possible through the act of sacrificing feminine subjectivity onto which materiality is projected. Bergoffen (2003:131) explains in this regard that the vulnerable body is feminised so that 'only one sex lives the humanity of vulnerability' and '[m]en's lived vulnerable bodies are encased/erased in imaginary, god-like, invulnerable bodies'. Importantly, what is at stake here is an *idealised* masculine subjectivity, in so far as it is rooted in a mythical conception of a fully autonomous, disembodied and therefore invulnerable masculinity which does not conform to the lived realities of men. In other words, the autonomous modern subject is also not wholly identifiable with masculine subjectivity either in so far as it does not encompass the vulnerability and embodiment of men, which is an unavoidable aspect of their embodied (as opposed to their idealised) subjectivity. The implication is that the universal subject of modernity also disadvantages men, because it requires them to identify with an idealised, impossible masculinity to which they do not conform. Du Toit argues in this regard that the myth of men as 'rational, self-contained, autonomous, physically invulnerable and independent beings' (Du Toit 2011:3) who transcend the limitations of their sex-specific embodiment, is withholding actual, living men from acknowledging or exposing any sign of vulnerability (Du Toit 2011:8).

In this order the sacrifice of the material and thus the feminine is necessary to enable the emergence of the universal. The implication of the sacrifice of the feminine and material as foil for subjectivity is that masculine subjectivity is universalised and becomes synonymous with all subjectivity. Irigaray explains this universalisation of the masculine subject as follows:

And by centering man outside himself, it has occasioned above all man's ex-stasis within the transcendental (subject). Rising to a perspective that would dominate the totality, to the vantage point of greatest power, he thus cuts himself off from the bedrock, from his empirical relationship with the matrix that he claims to survey (Irigaray 1985a:133 – 134).

Accordingly, masculine subjectivity is cut off from its material roots and is regarded to transcend its embodiment. In this way masculinity lays claim to universality. Embodiment and materiality are projected on woman. She is symbolically excluded and erased from this universality. As a result, there is nothing that limits masculine subjectivity and nothing that relativises it. In this way it becomes the measure of all subjectivity and stands in a relationship only to itself. Whitford explains that Irigaray shows that the subject of this order 'is narcissistic, closed to the encounter with the Other, while the Other (woman) has not yet acceded to subjectivity' (Whitford 1991:33). Because the feminine is that against which this universal masculine subject defines itself, subjectivity inherently comes to exclude femininity. According to Irigaray's argument then the feminine is not regarded as a category of subjectivity alongside the



masculine — and thus as a category of being in its own right — but merely as a foil or material basis for the emergence of an hyperbolic masculine subjectivity presented as the universal subject. In this sense ‘the feminine has become [...] the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality’ (Irigaray 1993b:20). Irigaray’s project is then to uncover the covert sexed nature of the symbolic order and to determine what the conditions are for the feminine to emerge as a subject.

### III How can this system be shifted?

Whitford describes Irigaray’s project as ‘an attempt to dismantle the defences of the Western cultural unconscious, to undo the work of repression, splitting, and disavowal, to restore links and connections and to put the “subject of philosophy” in touch with her unacknowledged mother’ (Whitford 1991:33). In order to do this it is necessary to reveal in detail the gesture in which the maternal feminine has been excluded from the intelligible realm (while continuing to supply its sensible material conditions) and to prevent the patriarchal version from falling back into place again by ‘providing alternative versions, alternative readings, alternative mythologies and alternative imaginary configurations, however provisional’ (Whitford 1991:103). There is therefore a critical and a creative aspect to Irigaray’s work. Firstly she aims to uncover the gesture of exclusion of the feminine or murder of the mother. Secondly she pursues the creation of an alternative order in which sexual difference can exist and both man and woman can claim full subjectivity, by working to bridge the symbolic division between the sensible and the intelligible.

It was seen in the previous section that Irigaray reads the setting up of the symbolic division of labour between the sensible and the intelligible in Plato’s cave myth by means of the way in which the prisoner leaves the cave to pursue the brightness of the Sun, the Idea. Whitford writes that one way in which this rift between the cave and Idea could be overcome is by showing that the transcendent is also sensible and *vice versa* (Whitford 1991:109). In other words, the rift could be overcome by showing that the sensible remains the bedrock for all transcendence so that the sensible and transcendent cannot be thought in separation of each other. However, Whitford notes that Irigaray shows how in the Platonic scenario, and in the current symbolic order, this is impossible, because ‘the scenes are laid out in such a way that imaginary intercourse between mother and father can never take place’ (Whitford 1991:109). The prisoner has to turn his back on the cave to step into the sun and there is no possibility for interaction between these two worlds. Irigaray thus argues that Western metaphysics does not allow the thinking of the intelligible and sensible realms together. Importantly, for Irigaray the answer is not to posit the maternal metaphor as alternative absolute origin, but to restore the forgotten relationship or path *between* the ‘mother’ and the ‘father’ (Whitford 1991:112). The ethics of sexual difference that she is pursuing is about overcoming or dissolving the symbolic division between matter and spirit.

In her retelling of the myth of the cave, Irigaray then tries to find a foothold for an alternative symbolic configuration by emphasising the forgotten passage between the cave and the outside world through which human beings enter the world as singular beings – thus the passage of birth. Irigaray highlights the *in-betweenness of the path as a ‘go-between’* ‘two “worlds,” two modes, two methods, two measures of replicating, representing, viewing’, the neglect of which will

‘found, subtend, sustain the hardening of two dichotomies, categorical differences, clear-cut distinctions, absolute discontinuities, all the confrontations of irreconcilable representations’ (Irigaray 1985a:246). In *Sorcerer Love* (1989) Irigaray re-inscribes the passage of birth as a ‘permanent *passage* between mortal and immortal’ (Irigaray 1989:189) and conceptualises love as a movement between the physical and the spiritual in a way that ‘confuse[s] the opposition between immanence and transcendence’ (Irigaray 1989:195). In this way Irigaray pursues a symbolic restructuring of identity that is not dependent on a division between the material and the transcendent and thus woman and man. It is a symbolic in which difference, ambiguity, multiplicity and change are not regarded to undermine being, subjectivity and identity, so that different kinds of subjects can exist alongside one another.

Irigaray seeks to establish what she refers to as a ‘fluid economy.’ She contrasts this to the current symbolic order which she refers to as the ‘economy of solids’ in so far as it ‘supposes, in some manner, a solid crust from which to raise a construction’ (Irigaray 1992:2). That which is feminine serves as the ‘solid crust’ or the amorphous outside against which the polis, subject and discourse is constructed (Irigaray 1992:2). In other words, the sacrificial economy of solids depends upon a ‘forgetting of those elements that do not have the same density’ (Irigaray 1992:2). In contrast, by allowing for the existence of a permanent ‘inbetween’ between the sensible and the intelligible and between all things of different density the burial of the mother can become undone and ‘concepts and subjectivity emerge within a dynamic interaction between the material and the intelligible, neither of which can be reduced to the other’ (Caldwell 2002:18). Irigaray describes this shift as follows:

The culture, the language, the imaginary and the mythology in which we live at the moment... I say to myself... let’s have a look ... this edifice looks so clean and so subtle... let’s see what ground it is built on. Is it all that acceptable? The substratum is the woman who reproduces the social order, who has made this order’s infrastructure: the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. The man-god-father killed the mother in order to take power. And isn’t there a fluidity, some flood, that could shake this social order? And if we make the foundations of the social order shift, then everything will shift. (Irigaray 1991: 47).

Irigaray thus understands the overcoming or dismantling of Western patriarchy to require replacing the sacrificial economy of solids with a fluid economy. Whitford explains that with the idea of the fluid economy Irigaray is trying to bring the metaphysical oppositions in relation to each other so that ‘each sex might be able to assume its own divisions [and] its own negativity’ (Whitford 1991:122). In other words, rather than one sex assuming the full burden of materiality and thereby granting the other sex full claim to subjectivity (which is conceptualised as that which transcends the flesh), and the former therefore acting as the negative for the latter, both sexes live both materiality and transcendence. It is therefore about bringing matter and spirit back into relation with each other so that all subjects can access both. On a symbolic level Irigaray is therefore engaged in a ‘renegotiation of identity structures’ in pursuit of producing a culture of sexual difference (Deutscher 2002:90).

#### IV Reading Irigaray alongside Oyěwùmí

Irigaray's diagnosis of the Western symbolic order and the colonial/modern gender system is comparable to Oyěwùmí's critique thereof. Moreover, the fluid economy, which she posits as alternative to this order, bears striking resemblance to the relational worldsense or metaphysics of precolonial Africa as captured and theorised in the sub-Saharan African tradition of relational thought which I argue to also underpin Oyěwùmí's description of Yorùbá society. Irigaray's analysis of Western patriarchy and the alternative she presents therefore helps to illuminate on a metaphysical level what Oyěwùmí means firstly, when she regards the colonial/modern gender system as one in which woman is inherently man's negative and secondly, when she links the gender equivalence in Yorùbá society to a fluid and relational understanding of the world and the subject. I unpack these points in more detail in what follows below.

It was seen that Oyěwùmí argues not only that Western subjectivity is modeled on the standard of the (white) man, but also that the rational subject of modern colonial Western thought is an implicitly masculine and disembodied one, while inert materiality is projected onto all who are different and therefore less than. In Chapter One I showed that she writes that in the history of Western thought 'the body is understood to be a non-essential part of the essentially rational and disembodied subject' and 'embodiment is reserved for the Other' (Oyěwùmí 1997:15). In Western thought one finds the 'man of reason' and 'the woman of the body' and these categories are oppositionally constructed (Oyěwùmí 1997:6). Oyěwùmí thus argues that in the Western order gender difference is mapped onto the matter/spirit dichotomy, which she connects to other dichotomies that play a central role in the colonial/modern gender system, namely material/spiritual and private/public. As a result, Oyěwùmí argues gender to be an inevitably oppressive hierarchical dichotomy in which woman cannot be anything but the material negative to rational man. It was seen that she writes that in the West '[d]ifference is expressed as degeneration' or as 'a deviation from the original type' (Oyěwùmí 1997:1). And 'in the West, women/females are the Other, being defined in antithesis to men/males, who represent the norm' (Oyěwùmí 1997:33). It was also seen in Chapter One that Oyěwùmí writes that 'dualisms like nature/culture, public/private, and visible/invisible are variations on the theme of male/female bodies' (Oyěwùmí 1997:7). In Chapter Three I argued with the help of Lugones that Oyěwùmí's work suggests that the colonial imposition of the colonial/modern gender system entails the imposition of a hierarchical and dichotomous construction of the world to which the man/woman dichotomy is central.

However, because Oyěwùmí's focus is sociological and not philosophical, she does not explore these thoughts in detail. She dedicates a relatively small part of the first chapter of *Invention of Women* to this critique of the colonial/modern gender system as a basis from which to theorise Yorùbá difference. She presents a few quotes from different Western scholars across different disciplines to echo her main points, but without making an attempt at theorising these issues in more depth. Why Western thought operates like this or how this logic works in more detailed terms, is not explained by her.

Irigaray's metaphysical analysis of the Western patriarchal order is very valuable in this regard, in so far as she provides a detailed explanation of these points of critique. Irigaray's analysis shows how the Western symbolic order and

therefore the colonial/modern gender system are rooted in a sacrificial metaphysics that erases materiality and difference. As explained above, in this order there is a symbolic division between the material, corporeal, sensible and natural which are allocated to the feminine and on the other hand the spiritual, ideal, intelligible, cultural which are allocated to the masculine. Discourse, language, identity, culture and subjectivity are constituted in relation to otherworldly ideals and emerge through the exclusion of a constitutive outside consisting of that which is material, corporeal, sensible and natural and coded feminine. In the Western symbolic order, according to Irigaray, subjectivity is defined in terms of transcendence of the material and thus of the feminine. As a result, subjectivity in this order has a masculine basis. The feminine provides only material support for masculine subjectivity. The Western symbolic order as an economy of solids is founded in a sacrificial metaphysics in terms of which difference is ordered in strict and hardened hierarchical dichotomies with no in between. It is in terms of this logic that the material which introduces ambiguity, change and multiplicity is regarded to undermine identity and must therefore be split off from the intelligible. Irigaray presents the subject of the Western symbolic order and of colonial modernity as a sacrificial subject which needs a material other as negative to support its self-identity. She therefore shows how this is a dichotomous order which is founded in the symbolic inferiorisation and repression of woman.

Reading Oyěwùmí with Irigaray's metaphysical analysis in mind thus provides deeper insight on how the imposition of the colonial/modern gender system on African societies fundamentally disrupts the fluid, non-dichotomous and relational metaphysics which African philosophers argue to belong to indigenous African thought and society, by mapping a sacrificial, binary framework onto it and thereby transforming on a fundamental level the way in which the world of the colonised works and is understood. Irigaray's work also illuminates the point that was made in the previous chapter with regard to the work of Lugones and Oyěwùmí that the gender dichotomy is central to colonial modernity's hierarchical and dichotomous approach to the world. She shows how the dichotomous reality of Western modernity is deeply gendered. Informing one's reading of Oyěwùmí's criticism of the colonial/modern gender system with Irigaray's metaphysical critique of the Western symbolic order therefore augments it with detailed and nuanced metaphysical explanations and arguments which support the points she is making and strengthens her position.

On the other hand, Irigaray's theory also can be used to explain from a metaphysical point of view on what basis precolonial Yorùbá society, as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí, facilitates or supports gender equivalence. Oyěwùmí shows how the different social organisation of precolonial Yorùbá society was one where female sexual difference did not imply inferiority and where persons occupied fluid identities that do not fit into the hierarchical gender dichotomy of the colonial/modern gender system. However, as a sociologist, she does not explore the underlying symbolic structures of this culture to figure out *why* it gives rise to such gender equivalence. Here again reading Irigaray's theory with Oyěwùmí presents a possible explanation. In terms of the relational metaphysics described by the sub-Saharan African philosophers discussed in Chapter Two and which I argue to underpin Oyěwùmí's descriptions and theorisations of precolonial Yorùbá society, subjectivity is not established in opposition to the (material) other in this relational construal of the world. The world is understood as an interrelated whole where subjectivity emerges through relations with the other and where the other who is different to the self is part of the structure of the self. Subjectivity is something practical, ethical and physical that is taken care of within the community

and in relations with others, which means that differences between concrete human beings are deeply relevant for subjectivity. This Yorùbá worldsense bears striking overlaps to the fluid economy that Irigaray envisions as alternative to the sacrificial economy of Western patriarchy. In Irigarayan terms it can be said that Oyěwùmí as well as sub-Saharan relational philosophy describe an order in which the intelligible is not split off from the sensible, where identity emerges in relation to difference, and where fluidity rather than sacrifice is the governing principle. It was seen in this regard in Chapter Two that Oyěwùmí describes a world ‘conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together’ (Oyěwùmí 1997:14). I read her in that chapter in line with the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought, to understand the world as a ‘single totality of existence’ (Wiredu 1998:416) and as ‘a single reality neither material nor immaterial’ (Menkiti 2006:125) in which there is no sharp divide between the material and the spiritual and the material or the intelligible and the sensible. I also explained that in Oyěwùmí’s matricentric construction of the subject these hierarchical and dichotomous distinctions in the construal of subjectivity are traversed and problematised continuously. I look at this in more detail in Chapter Five. Accordingly, for Oyěwùmí, difference is therefore central to subjectivity rather than compromising it and subjectivity cannot be thought separately from materiality. In Irigarayan terms this means that, unlike in the sacrificial symbolic order of the West, sexual difference is allowed to emerge in so far as subjectivity is not produced through sacrifice of difference in terms of which only one kind of sexed subjectivity (which is masculine in the Western symbolic order and the colonial/modern gender system) is set up as standard for humanity while the Other (feminine) acts as foil for its emergence. As a result woman does not have to exist only as negative to man and does not have to represent the material, the private, the natural, the immanent and the passive that serves as foil for the intelligible, the public and the cultural which are mapped onto man. It was seen that with her notion of the fluid economy, Irigaray seeks firstly to contribute to establishing a symbolic capable of acknowledging difference and interdependence without submitting them to hierarchy and erasure and secondly ‘a form of subjectivity that would avoid projecting difference, ambiguity, and materiality onto others’ (Caldwell 2002:23). It can be argued that precolonial Yorùbá society as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí represents such an order in which such a form of subjectivity is present.

Reading Irigaray alongside Oyěwùmí therefore sheds new light on firstly, her critique of the dichotomous logic of the colonial/modern gender system and secondly, the potential for gender equivalence of the fluid Yorùbá gender system that she posits. This shows that Western feminism can also be a valuable ally to African feminists in their analyses and criticism of the colonial/modern gender system. Although Irigaray has her blind spots (as will be seen in the next section) it is clear that she does not uncritically or unwittingly write within the tradition of modern Western thought and simply absorbs all its assumptions. She challenges, contests, questions and disrupts the tradition from within she is situated in a way that can be helpful to scholars, like Oyěwùmí, who are working to understand and dismantle the colonial/modern gender system in their own societies.

Lastly, it is significant that the fluid economy which Irigaray pursues as an alternative to Western patriarchy, corresponds so strikingly to the African relational universe. The implication is that dismantling the Western gender structures in African societies does not only mean that a space opens up to approach things in ways that are more true to African thought and history, but also that embracing African relational ways of thinking offers huge potential for

gender equivalence everywhere, because it allows for (sexual) difference to exist and therefore for the feminine to be a legitimate subject position alongside the masculine. In other words, the relationality of sub-Saharan African thought is specifically conducive to the flourishing of sexual difference which allows for all kinds of sexed subjects to claim full subjecthood and to take part in society as full subjects. These insights offer a deep critique on discourses that pit the pursuit of gender equivalence on the African continent against African cultures and worldviews.

## **V Critical reflections: race**

### *a) Gender and Race*

There is a limit, however, to how much one can gain from reading Oyěwùmí and Irigaray together, because Oyěwùmí's criticism of the colonial/modern gender system is fully embedded in her criticism of colonialism and coloniality, while Irigaray's criticism of the Western symbolic order isolates sexual difference from race and culture as the primary and most important issue. In this sense they are representative of the main difference between African and Western feminisms, as explained in the Introduction. In *I Love To You* Irigaray writes:

The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem [...] and the same goes for other cultural diversities – religious, economic, political ones. Sexual difference probably represents the most universal question we can address. Our era is faced with the task of dealing with this issue, because, across the whole world, there are, there are only, men and women (Irigaray 1996: 47).

In this quote, Irigaray holds gender to be the difference that is more fundamental than all other differences. Racial and cultural differences are secondary to sexual difference and the issue of the oppression of woman precedes all other forms of oppression. Grosz explains that for Irigaray sexual difference is an 'ontological difference that is radically different from that of racial, ethnic, religious, class and other differences' (Grosz 2012: 73). Accordingly, for Irigaray racial, ethnic, religious, class and other differences seem to be only social or cultural while sexual difference is ontological and universal.

In this regard Oyěwùmí's theory highlights a very significant shortcoming of Irigaray's theory (apart from the idea that sexual difference is not universal, which I discuss in the next section). In the previous chapter I argued with reference to the work of Oyěwùmí and other scholars like Lugones that gender and race are inextricably interwoven in the sacrificial logic of the colonial/modern gender system. Irigaray's analysis falls short in so far as she does not consider the possibility at all that race and gender can be categories that intersect and co-constitute each other. Moreover, it was seen that Irigaray regards woman to be the first and primary casualty of the sacrificial economy of the Western symbolic order. Her work shows very well how the colonial/modern gender system introduces a sacrificial economy where difference is sacrificed and man represents the standard for humanity. However, Oyěwùmí and other scholars show how the Western symbolic order is just as dependent on the exclusion of the racial other as on the exclusion of the

sexual other. I explain this in detail in what follows.

Oyěwùmí refers explicitly to the way in which gender overlaps with other categories like race in the oppressive logic of the colonial/modern gender system. She explains that 'Western discourse' is centred on a binary opposition between body and mind in which the body is 'articulated as the debased side of human nature' while the mind is privileged as being 'lofty and high above the foibles of the flesh' and 'the body was seen as a trap from which any rational person had to escape' (Oyěwùmí 1997:3). This body/mind dichotomy is not only gendered, but also raced:

'Bodylessness' has been a precondition of rational thought. Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor and all those who qualified for the label 'different' in varying historical epochs have been considered to be the embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them. They are the Other and the Other is a body' (Oyěwùmí 1997:3).

Oyěwùmí thus argues that the colonised and the African, like woman, are relegated to the margins of subjectivity by serving as the inert material foil for the subjectivity of the modern Western man of reason. Oyěwùmí shows how subjectivity is measured with regard to sameness to a disembodied ideal which is modeled on Western masculine subjectivity, while materiality is projected onto women and non-Western people making them the other in opposition to which the Western rational masculine subject defines itself.

In his book, *On the Postcolony* (2001), Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe explains the racial dimension of this logic very well. Mbembe helps us to understand how the exclusion or repression of the identity of the colonised enables the self-identity of the coloniser, just as how for Irigaray, the (implicitly masculine) subject arises through the turning away from the maternal:

Like matter. In the eyes of the settler, the native has no limits but his or her physical body. It is this body, these features, these muscles, that make up the sum total of the native's "being." [...] In short, the colonized subject is an embodiment (Mbembe 2001:187).

Because the colonised cannot represent itself as existent and cannot aspire to transcendence, the colonised does not truly exist as a subject but only as part of the universe of immediate things or animals (Mbembe 2001:187). Like woman, the colonised is reduced to pure inert matter that stands in opposition to subjectivity. Mbembe explains that '[a]s a world of immanence and immediacy, the animal world has no ability to transcend itself, the power to transcend oneself being a peculiarly human characteristic' (Mbembe 2001:189). For Mbembe the determining characteristic of colonial violence is the way it operates through annihilation: by consigning the colonised to radical otherness, as that which is the antithesis of what truly exists, the coloniser also annihilates the colonised (Mbembe 2001:188). This is what enables the 'constitution of the colonizer as subject par excellence': 'to exist, the colonizer constantly needs the native as that animal that serves as the support for the colonizer's self-consciousness' (Mbembe 2001:188). Similar to the relation between woman and man in Irigaray's account, the colonised therefore serves as the immanent and material

other for the emergence of rational and transcendent subjectivity which the colonised lays claim to.

Nigerian philosopher Sanya Osha argues in this regard that just as woman represents the 'hole' that stands in opposition to and threatens the constructions of reason ('the dark continent [that] threatens the regions of light'), Africa was associated with darkness and regarded to be filled with 'dim minds' (Osha 2006:164). He writes that as a result and 'by this singular classificatory grid, the white female and African subject are united under the burden of White Male Oppression' (Osha 2006:164). The global system of modern colonial capitalism is thus established through an implicit division of labour between the Intelligible (represented by the white man) and its material conditions (represented by the maternal-feminine but also the colonised). The reproductive and productive powers of woman, but also of the colonised, constitute the silent and unacknowledged material foundation which serves as foil and sustenance for the emergence of white, disembodied subjectivity.

Similar to Irigaray's understanding of masculine subjectivity in Western patriarchy, Mbembe understands the subjectivity of the colonised as one which universalises itself and thus extends itself limitlessly. While the colonised is only her physical body, the coloniser occupies the position of the absolute. Mbembe writes:

To colonize is also to deploy a subjectivity freed of any limit, a subjectivity seeing itself as absolute but which, to experience that absolute, must constantly reveal it to itself by creating, destroying, and desiring the thing and the animal that it has previously summoned into existence (Mbembe 2001:189).

The subjectivity of the coloniser is thus one that universalises itself and emerges through the continuous negation of the colonised as subject. The coloniser (like the man in Irigaray's analysis) does not recognise its own limits and maintaining its self-identity means a continuous disavowal of the colonised, who then forms the unacknowledged basis for the limitless/expansive subjectivity of the coloniser. Mbembe explains that '[i]n the colony everything is the grist to the mill against which the colonizer's faculty of representation exercises itself, [...] the colonizer is only conscious of self in the enjoyment of the thing that he or she produces and possesses, and the appetite this brings' (Mbembe 2001:188-189).<sup>56</sup> According to Mbembe then, the colonial symbolic economy and its subject are dependent on and sustained by the annihilation of the colonised in a similar way that Irigaray argues the Western symbolic economy and subject to be supported and sustained by the gesture of exclusion of the maternal body and the erasure of difference.

Reading Oyěwùmí, Mbembe and Osha it becomes clear that the Western symbolic is just as dependent on the exclusion

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<sup>56</sup> Mbembe also makes the broader argument that Africa serves as a foil against which the West emerges. He explains that Africa as 'dark cave' or 'bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos' (Mbembe 2001:3) still serves as 'one of the metaphors through which the west represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates his image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity' (Mbembe 2001:2). Mbembe argues that one characteristic of traditional societies is their projected or imagined facticity, and that '[c]aught in a relation of pure immediacy to the world and to themselves, such societies are incapable of uttering the universal' (Mbembe 2001:3). Accordingly, just as, according to Irigaray's account, the feminine as representative of the embodied and particular is unable to speak truth, serves as foil for the emergence of the universal subject, 'Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity' (Mbembe 2001:4).



and exploitation of the racial Other as it is on the exclusion and exploitation on the sexual Other. In colonial modernity sex and race are therefore interwoven in a way that places the colonised woman in a particularly problematic position in the sense that as woman *and* colonised she is doubly dismissed, and doubly rendered invisible, mute and material. By isolating sex as *the* issue of our age (Irigaray 1993a:5) and separating it from and prioritising it over issues like race and culture, Irigaray's analysis does not register the multiple levels of exclusion of the colonised woman. Her theory therefore assumes that all women are in the same way erased by this order and gender is the only axis on which this logic operates. In this regard her analysis of the Western symbolic order lacks an awareness of the multiple power structures inherent to Western thinking. This not only limits the relevance of her theory, but also impoverishes it: the idea of the double exclusion of the colonised woman could be a potent resource for her in so far as she is interested in that which is excluded and left unsymbolised in the Western symbolic order.

#### b) *Irigaray and cultural difference*

However, Irigaray in her later work has attempted to broaden her theory to apply to other differences. Whereas in *I Love to You* she clearly understood sexual difference to be the only universal difference, in later work she returns to the problem of the relationship between sexual difference and other differences. In *Between East and West* (2002) she extends her work on the ethics of sexual difference to form a framework through which to approach cultural and racial difference. Sexual difference here is seen as a model for relating to other differences.

Irigaray explains that the dichotomies that form the basis of Western thought do not allow a culture of alterity or a relation with the Other in so far as she who is different is reduced to the negative of the subject (Irigaray 2002:126). To transform these categories and to enable a culture of alterity, the subject must respect its own limits through acknowledging what she calls 'the negative in sexual difference.' In *I Love To You* Irigaray defines this concept as 'an acceptance of the limits of my gender and recognition of the irreducibility of the other' (Irigaray 1996:13). At stake here is therefore the recognition by every subject that it does not represent the universal, because there are other subjects that are different; '[be]ing sexuate implies a negative, a not being the other, a not being the whole, and a particular way of being: tied to the body and in relationship with the other' (Irigaray 2000b:34). Irigaray claims that '[b]ecause I'm able to situate there [in sexual difference] the difference and the negative that I will never surmount [...] I'm able to respect the differences everywhere: differences between the other races, differences between the generations and so on. Because I've placed a limit on my horizon, on my power' (Irigaray, Hirsch and Olson 1995:110). The potential to apply Irigaray's theory of sexual difference to other differences than race, therefore lies in the manner in which it promotes an acknowledgment of the finiteness that is inherent in being embodied. She argues that if the subject lacks proper borders, it cannot approach the other without appropriating her (Irigaray 2002:18). An ethics of sexual difference introduces an approach to subjectivity in which no subject can claim universality in so far as he or she belongs to a one gender (or *genre*<sup>57</sup>). The limit that sexual difference implies leads to self-limitation of the subject and

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<sup>57</sup> Halsema explains that Irigaray uses the notion of *genre* to articulate the idea that gender is not just connected to the sexed body, but it forms a universal in which we become as human beings in relation to persons of our own 'kind'. For Irigaray our embodiment

respect for the sexual other. An ethics of sexual difference which breaks open the unity of the subject and conceptualises subjectivity in terms of two (sexes) rather than one, therefore opens a space for all difference in so far as it leads to an acknowledgement that no one subject can claim to represent the universal human being. Irigaray introduces a conception of subjectivity that is 'structured not by mastering or dominating but by accepting that the subject is not the whole, that the subject presents only one part of reality and truth' (Irigaray 2002:127).

This could present a route through which to approach not only sexual difference, but also other differences like race in so far as it constitutes a model for the delineation of the self on the basis of an acknowledgement of embodied difference. Deuniversalising white subjectivity in this way could help to 'provincialise' the West (in Chakrabarty's terms, as explained in Chapter One) in so far as it is reigned in to acknowledge its position as one geopolitical space among many, rather than representing the universal. In other words, by acknowledging the embodiment of the subject, and regarding embodied difference as relevant to subjectivity, the subject can also recognise the negative of racial difference and respect the racial other. Subjectivity is also limited by race, so that persons of all races must respect the limit of irreducible difference between them and persons of other races. This means that universal subjectivity cannot be modeled on one racial or cultural group. It also means that being of a certain skin colour or culture cannot be understood to make one more or less human. Irigaray also writes that an ethics of sexual difference 'offers the basis for a specifically human behaviour' (Irigaray 2002: x) in so far as it can create a universe composed of 'relations-between and not of one + one + one' (Irigaray 2002:17). Irigaray thus sees her ethics of sexual difference as facilitating a relational and non-sacrificial approach also to cultural and racial identity in so far as identity and subjectivity are not established through exclusion of or in opposition to the other, but within relation to the other.

American feminist philosopher Penelope Deutscher argues that Irigaray's treatment of difference in *Between East and West* represents an important shift in her work in so far as sexual difference becomes a means to the end of a culture that values and embraces difference (Deutscher 2002:171). Here it becomes possible not to view sexual difference as the most important difference that is a goal that we should necessarily pursue, but rather the most important difference in so far as it can facilitate all other differences (Deutscher 2002:171). Deutscher thus interprets Irigaray to be stepping back from her focus on sexual difference and moving towards a more general privileging of a culture of difference (Deutscher 2002:172). She explains that Irigaray's model of sexual difference can be interpreted as a formal structure or conceptual device of respect for the unknown which could then work to facilitate recognition and respect for all kinds of differences in society (Deutscher 2002:172).

However, also in her understanding of sexual difference as model for respect for other differences, Irigaray does not address the criticism that I raised earlier, namely that she does not engage with the way in which gender cannot be understood separately from race or culture in the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order. She discusses the application of her ethics of sexual difference in an ethical vein, that is, offering a model through which people can

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requires us to participate in the community of our *genre*, belonging to one's *genre* implies a horizon against which we develop as particular beings (Halsema 2010:47).

learn to acknowledge and respect those who are different from them. She therefore does not take into account that just as man must be dismantled and forced to recognise his own limits, whiteness/westernness must be dismantled and forced to recognise its own limits. The work of scholars like Oyěwùmí and Mbembe make clear that in the sacrificial economy where the material is understood in opposition to subjectivity and thus sacrificed, it is woman *and* the non-Western/African/colonised that represent the material. Subjectivity is defined with reference to masculinity *and* whiteness/Westernness. The amorphous outside of discourse, subjectivity and culture is feminine *and* black or non-Western. Like woman, the colonised or non-Western represents in the dominant symbolic the inferior or negative side of the dichotomous hierarchies in terms of which difference is construed and the world is understood. In so far as Irigaray's theory of sexual difference aims to understand the subject as limited, it opens a space for difference to flourish and does in principle offer a framework for the deuniversalising of white and Western subjectivity and creating a space for the racial difference to flourish. However, she fails to acknowledge the convergence of masculinity and whiteness in the sacrificial model of identity that needs to be overcome in order to enable a culture of alterity. Her work therefore shows no recognition or awareness of the idea that whiteness is not just one race or difference among others, it is, like masculinity, and overlapping with masculinity, *the* category that must be dethroned and deuniversalised or particularised to make space for the emergence of the other as fully fledged subject.

## **VI Critical reflections: the subject**

Notwithstanding the difference between Oyěwùmí and Irigaray in their understanding of the relation between gender and race, there is a strong overlap in the way they understand of subjectivity. I explained in Chapter Two that I read Oyěwùmí to subscribe to a relational notion of subjectivity similar to what one sees theorised in sub-Saharan African philosophy and that I read the precolonial Yorùbá subject that she describes to, to be one that cannot be conceived of abstractly in the absence of concrete relations to the environment and other persons. I interpret her to subscribe to the idea that the precolonial Yorùbá subject emerges from within material relations with concrete others and that subjectivity is thought through material otherness rather than against it. Rather than humanity being a gathering of separate selves, every self is understood as something that exists as part of other selves in a way that defies clear boundaries – subjectivity is always intersubjectivity. This means also that, unlike the autonomous, singular and insulated subject of colonial modernity which is regarded to have a true and unchanging mind that is independent of the body, the precolonial Yorùbá subject as presented by Oyěwùmí, is, like the subject of African relational philosophy, embodied, vulnerable and inherently unstable. In terms of this understanding subjectivity is not dependent on the exclusion of matter and the other, but is constituted in interaction therewith. For Oyěwùmí then, subjectivity inevitably implies also interdependence, collaboration and mutual exposedness to the other.

Central to Irigaray's work is a critique of the atomistic, disembodied subject of the Western symbolic order. In its place she envisions a fluid and relational notion of subjectivity in which the boundaries between matter and spirit are blurred. She describes this subject as 'not [being] closed off in the self-sufficiency of a consciousness or a mind' and a self that 'always also remain[s] for the other' (Irigaray 1993a:126). Irigaray therefore posits a vulnerable, embodied subject that is not defined in opposition to the other, but that stands open to otherness. She also writes: '[b]eing sexuate implies

[...] a particular way of being: tied to the body and in relationship with the other' (Irigaray 2000b:34). By embedding subjectivity in the sexed body, Irigaray offers a notion of the subject as being situated in a community in so far as humans as embodied beings are exposed to one another, vulnerable to one another and dependent on one another. Accordingly, similar to Oyěwùmí, Irigaray imagines a relational alternative to the autonomous modern subject, a subject in which the boundaries between self and other and between matter and spirit are blurred.

a) *Irigaray's sexed universal*

Despite both of them subscribing to this relational and fluid notion of subjectivity, there remains a crucial difference in the way in which Oyěwùmí and Irigaray conceptualise the subject in universal terms. Irigaray understands subjectivity in terms of a 'sexed universal' which Halsema describes as an embodied subjectivity through which the sexes stand in relation to each other, while having their own symbolic articulation (Halsema 1998:192). Accordingly, even though Irigaray understands the subject in relation to its sexual other, she envisions an ontological divide between masculine and feminine subjectivity. Irigaray inscribes sexual difference into universal subjectivity so that it reflects both masculine and feminine subjectivity. In her book *I love to You* she writes about pursuing an era in which sexual difference is a universal, in other words, where the subject is sexed:

Without doubt, the most appropriate content for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component for the universal. The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else (Irigaray 1996:47).

She therefore understands the difference between man and woman to be the most fundamental difference in human life (and in nature) and on this basis she argues that our notion of the universal subject should reflect this difference. She writes further that '[t]he natural is at least two: male and female' (Irigaray 1996: 35). Halsema explains in this regard that Irigaray reveals the current universal in the Western symbolic order as particular (like Spivak [1992] and Braidotti [1992]) in so far as it represents only *one* of the two halves of the world, namely the masculine (Halsema 1998: 191). Accordingly, Irigaray is trying to get away from a gender neutral universal that is implicitly masculine and therefore not universal at all, by replacing it with a universal that is explicitly sexed and represents both man and woman. Halsema explains that Irigaray's criticism of the false universalism of the Western symbolic order does not lead her to reject universalism in principle (Halsema 1998: 191). She rather chooses to reformulate the universal in a way that places the universal subject in relation with its other and in this way she remains true to the universalism of Enlightenment (Halsema 1998: 192).

By opting for a sexed universal, Irigaray seems to be doing exactly what Oyěwùmí criticises Western feminism so harshly for. It was seen in the previous chapters that Oyěwùmí argues that despite trying to overcome and undermine the oppressing universalism of colonial modernity, Western feminism perpetuates it by universalising the notion of

gender, which Oyěwù mí argues to be a modern Western cultural particular. In applying this critique to Irigaray's work, it was seen how Irigaray explicitly argues that sexual difference is the first and most fundamental difference that exists among *all* humans regardless of race or culture. She regards the categories of man and woman to be so fundamental that she reformulates universal subjectivity to reflect these categories. In this sense, Oyěwù mí's work underscores a major problem in Irigaray's work, namely the Western assumption of the universality of the categories of man and woman, without allowing for the possibility that other cultures are organised in radically different ways. Oyěwù mí's work therefore problematises one of the premises most central to Irigaray's work, namely that sexual difference is universal and more fundamental than all other differences, a claim that reflects the centrality of sexual difference in Western culture. Although Irigaray criticises Western culture for forgetting sexual difference, Irigaray at the same time proves to be its heir in suggesting that sexual difference is the most important difference, thereby forgetting other differences. Oyěwù mí's work suggests that Irigaray is, in that sense, repeating the oppressive and false universalisation that she identifies to be central to Western patriarchy. In other words, I read Oyěwù mí's work to suggest that, like the patriarchal order that she is trying to undermine and resist, Irigaray is guilty of European bias in so far as she is universalising a particular (sexual difference) that represents only certain people. Where Irigaray is trying to create a universal that is not false, but that includes everyone (man *and* woman), she fails, because man and woman do not exist in this way in all cultures and are therefore categories that do not in fact represent the whole of humanity.

*b) Critiquing Irigaray's sexed universal from the perspective of Oyěwù mí's 'matricentric' subject*

Apart from problematising Irigaray's endeavour of articulating a sexed universal, Oyěwù mí's work implicitly raises two further questions with regard to Irigaray's work. The first question is whether Irigaray's sexed universal does not unduly limit the fluidity and plurality of relational subjectivity. The second question is whether, by inscribing sexual difference into universal subjectivity, Irigaray is not making too little of the relationship *between* the sexes.

It was seen that for Oyěwù mí, the fluid and dynamic nature of the relational Yorùbá subject undermines any attempt to fix identity as man or woman. Because the subject is continuously (re)constituted in dynamic relations with others, it cannot be reduced to and contained on one 'side' of the gender divide. Moreover, the way in which Oyěwù mí posits the mother as representative of universal subjectivity for the Yorùbá, suggests that the relational subject of Yorùbá society is first and foremost and always already and inevitably in relation with the (m)other (see Chapter Five). It is thus an understanding of the subject as a being with alterity at its centre. In her description of the importance of the connection with the mother in Yorùbá society, Oyěwù mí is therefore presenting a subject that defies categorisation within the fixed gender categories of man or woman in so far as the self always already contains the other and because the self, as constituted in multiple relationships, is more than one thing at once. In other words, Oyěwù mí thinks in terms of a radically alternative notion of universal subjectivity where alterity is at the heart of subjectivity so that the universal subject is plural rather than unified and singular. Oyěwù mí then rejects an understanding of sexual difference in terms of a dualism or a dyad, because it limits the fluidity and plurality of the relational subject.

It was seen that Irigaray, on the other hand, rethinks subjectivity in terms of a sexed universal, where masculine and feminine subjectivity are ontologically divided. Here it should be emphasised again that the gender divide in Irigaray's work is not the hierarchical, dichotomous opposition between man and woman that Oyěwùmí (and Irigaray) regards to be innate to the Western symbolic order. Irigaray shows throughout her work that she wants to create the possibility for each sex to define itself in a process of continuous becoming, without the one restricting the other's becoming. Man and woman in Irigaray's work also do not constitute two predetermined and predefined categories. In her book *A Politics of impossible difference: The later work of Luce Irigaray* (2002), Deutscher makes the argument that Irigaray fights for the *possibility* of sexual difference to emerge, rather than giving content to the category of woman (Deutscher 2002). She explains that Irigaray's sexed universal does not mean that Irigaray holds men and women to have different subjectivities, rather, she is concerned with the idea that Western society has made it impossible that they *could* have different subjectivities (Deutscher 2002:12). Deutscher emphasises that in Irigaray's work the ontological status of sexual difference is therefore entirely left open so that it is an 'open term' or 'a pair of empty brackets', it is 'an excluded possibility, some kind of femininity (open in content) that has never become culturally coherent or possible' in so far as it is something more than opposite, complement or same (Deutscher 2002:29). Elizabeth Grosz also explains that sexual difference is not based on existing properties, qualities or characteristics of the two sexes, but is indeterminable and denotes that what does not yet exist (Grosz 2012:72). She refers to it as an 'indeterminable difference' and 'a difference that is always in the process of differentiating itself' (Grosz 2012:72). For Irigaray the two genders and the difference between them are therefore not two categories that are predetermined and closed off, but open categories of becoming.

Despite this open understanding of sexual difference, Oyěwùmí's work highlights some contradictions between the relationality and fluidity of Irigaray's subject, on the one hand, and the fact that the sexually different subject needs to fit into one of two categories. Oyěwùmí's work implies that a fluid and relational understanding of identity is not reconcilable with a rigid division of sexual identity into two. In other words, Oyěwùmí's work raises the question with regard to Irigaray's work, that if sexual identity is constituted in multiple dynamic and shifting relations with others who are different, why limit sexual identity to two exclusive and clearly delineated categories that are supposed to reflect 'human nature' (Irigaray 1996:35-42)? Would 'human nature' not rather be multiple?

Another question that the notion of subjectivity found in Oyěwùmí's work raises with regard to Irigaray's sexed universal is whether the way in which Irigaray divides or separates masculine and feminine subjectivity is not to the detriment of the mutual vulnerability and relationality between the sexes that a relational understanding of subjectivity implies. The way in which Oyěwùmí posits the mother as universal representative of the Yorùbá subject attests to a profound acknowledgement of exposedness and vulnerability of the relational subject *also* to its sexual other. Accordingly, the relational subject is not singular and unified, and it does not have clear boundaries that separate it from what is other. Sexual otherness is not thought as antithetical to the self, but part of the self because the self exists only in relation to the (m)other. Accordingly, the Yorùbá context as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí suggests that if one takes relational subjectivity seriously, the relation between differently sexed or gendered subjects would be a relationship of profound interdependence, intersubjectivity and vulnerability. This gets lost when Irigaray places an

ontological divide between differently sexed subjects. Placing an ontological divide between masculine and feminine subjectivity precludes this kind of exposedness and vulnerability in so far as it isolates the subject in its own sexual identity. In other words, dividing masculine and feminine subjectivity metaphysically leaves the sexed subject in a way invulnerable to its other. The Yorùbá context, as described by Oyěwùmí raises the question of whether Irigaray, with her notion of the sexual duality of subjectivity and her strong focus on the relationship of persons with their own sex is not making too little of the relationality and vulnerability *between* the sexes.

## **VII Critical reflections: gender duality and multiplicity**

The issue of the lack of sexual multiplicity in Irigaray's work that will be discussed in this section flows from the points made in the previous section. One of the central questions that has repeatedly been raised by scholars of Irigaray is whether she is able to sustain 'an affirmation of an unfixed, undetermined concept of feminine identity' (Deutscher 2002:52) or whether with her emphasis on sexual difference as a universal, she denies women the freedom to live their bodies in ways they choose to. Feminist philosopher Lisa Guenther explains that although Irigaray's early work did pursue multiple possibilities for women's identity through the notion of sexual difference, in her later work (where she can be interpreted to subscribe to a 'natural' difference between man and woman) Irigaray emphasises the duality of sexual difference at the expense of multiplicity (Guenther 2010:25). Irigarayan feminist philosopher Alison Stone argues that Irigaray's exclusive focus on two sexes marginalises the experience of bodily multiplicity (Stone 2006:85); her repeated suggestion that the only genuine encounter with difference can happen between the sexes enforces heteronormativity (Stone 2006:7) and excludes the possibility of accounting for intersex or transsexual bodies without understanding them as unnatural (Stone 2006: 49). American scholar Craig Gingrich-Philbrook refers to this as 'heteronormative essentialism' – an 'essentialist call for men and women to assume their proper places in love's division of labour' (Gingrich-Philbrook 2001:222). Stone also argues that seeing difference only in terms of the man/woman duality represses difference between persons of the same sex and within each person (Stone 2006:121 - 122).

It was seen in the previous section that Irigaray explains her emphasis on the two as a way of 'suspending the authority of the One' (Irigaray 2000a:129). On this basis scholars like the American feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver have defended her approach as 'a strategic move to open up [sexual] multiplicity' in so far as 'in order to get multiplicity we must first have two' (Oliver 2001: 209). Stone explains Irigaray's rejection of multiplicity in favour of duality as flowing from the fact that affirming multiplicity brings one back to unity in so far as it is the common character of all bodies (Stone 2006:85). In other words, two resists unity in a way that the many cannot. Similarly, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti holds that Irigaray's radicalisation of the categories of male and female is the basis for a new kind of ethics in which alterity is fully respected and accepted as a fundamental element of human existence (Braidotti 1994:133). According to this argument the enabling of a new feminine humanity through sexual difference breaks open the exclusionary zone of the singular subject based on sameness. Subjectivity is therefore opened up in a movement toward the recognition and love of the other, thus enabling a fertile relation with alterity. This kind of strategy has been defined and defended by scholars like Gayatri Spivak (1985), Naomi Schor (1987) and Rosi Braidotti (1988) as a

*strategic* form of essentialism. Stone explains that according to strategic essentialism feminists should acknowledge that essentialism is descriptively false in that it denies the real diversity of people's lives and social situations, while at the same time, feminists should continue to act as if essentialism were true in order to change the existing unequal power structures (Stone 2004:142). Irigaray therefore works with the category of woman in order to undo its exclusion from the Western symbolic order. Irigaray is interpreted to say that we cannot let go of the essentialist categories of woman and man before the exclusion of woman is made undone. In other words, we cannot undo the exclusion of woman, without acknowledging the category of woman. Moreover, many scholars also develop readings of Irigaray's duality that allows for multiplicity to arise from the duality, for example Deutscher<sup>58</sup> and Guenther.<sup>59</sup>

However, for many feminist scholars Irigaray's later work in which she works to a greater extent with a 'natural' duality (in other words she seems to subscribe a natural difference between man and woman, rather than using duality as a way to crack open singular, masculine identity), closes off the possibility of sexual multiplicity. On this basis it can be argued that by limiting sexual difference to a heterosexual duality Irigaray's theory is guilty of the same oppressive logic of sameness for which it criticises the Western gender scheme, in so far as it erects a standard (albeit it a sexually differentiated standard) of sameness for subjectivity and limits the expression of difference. In Cornell and Thurschwell's words, it denies the 'self-difference' of the gendered subject (Cornell & Thurschwell 1987:161).

It was seen above that, in contrast to Irigaray, Oyěwùmí rejects an understanding of subjectivity in terms of a gender dualism or a dyad (in other words, understanding all subjects to occupy, life long, either the category of male or the category of female). As a result, the relational subject of her work seems better equipped than Irigaray's subject to cater for, enable and embrace multiplicity. As explained in Chapter Two and further discussed above, the Yorùbá world that she sketches is fluid and dynamic and subjects are constituted within an ever changing network of relations. On this basis Oyěwùmí argues that the Yorùbá subject cannot be fixed into the set categories of man or woman which then define it life long and in all situations and dimensions of life. As explained in Chapter One, while it seems at first glance as if Oyěwùmí is returning to a gender neutral subject and rejecting sexual difference, I interpret her to open subjectivity to sexual multiplicity. Oyěwùmí posits a society in which it is taken seriously that bodies are different and that they have different capacities, but where these differences do not lead to oppression, marginalisation or social

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<sup>58</sup> Deutscher argues that understanding sexual identity as belonging to one of two *genres*, as Irigaray does, enables not only difference between the sexes but also within each sex. Deutscher explains in this regard that genre means something different from gender in so far as 'sexuate genre is a model for a qualitative sexual sameness, enabled by difference and also enabling difference' (Deutscher 2002:116). She writes that '[m]y relationship to genre allows a form of self-identity, but one posited only on the endless deferral of differences constituting a genre' (Deutscher 2002:116). Accordingly, Deutscher argues that Irigaray's notion of genre implies sameness between the constituting parts in order for them to be part of the same genre, but it also implies difference, otherwise it wouldn't be genre but just a category or an entity. Connecting to and belonging with others who share a sexual identity with me allows me to form a sense of self-identity, but the sameness at the basis of this self-identity is embedded in the differences which enable the existence of the genre. Deutscher writes that subjects would be co-extensive with their genre rather than identifying with it as an ideal and it would be thought of as an infinite and unfinished series (Deutscher 2002:86). This implies that situating subjects as part of one or two sexes does not fix their sexual identity but enables their self-difference and becoming.

<sup>59</sup> Guenther (2010) rereads the opening scene of Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1913) in order to develop a model of the relationship between sexual duality and multiplicity in which duality is not foundational for multiplicity but that duality and multiplicity are rather co-implicating. Guenther uses Irigaray's duality as a starting point, but moves past it to a notion of sexual difference in which duality and multiplicity are co-implicated.



categorisation. When Oyěwùmí denies the existence of woman, she therefore does not deny the existence of females, but a fixed, inferior and limited identity of woman defined in relation to the fixed and superior identity of man. In other words, Oyěwùmí describes a society in which subjectivity is continuously forged in dynamic relations with others and spills over the hierarchical and dichotomous categories of male and female or Western colonial modernity. Also, the relational Yorùbá subject as described by Oyěwùmí is characterised by multiplicity that cannot be reduced to one identity – a person is many different things in many different relationships and contexts. Oyěwùmí's societal model is therefore in principle very well equipped to accommodate sexual multiplicity. It does not require of persons to fit into either male or female categories and allows persons to change and to be many things at the same time. It should therefore enable persons who do not fit neatly into the anatomical and social categories of man and woman and those whose desires do not conform to the heterosexual scheme, to live equivalent lives.<sup>60</sup>

However, although Oyěwùmí's theory in principle allows for the flourishing of sexual multiplicity, for all practical purposes her work excludes multiplicity in sexual relations and identities, because she does not engage with the possibility at all. In other words, Oyěwùmí never makes use of this potential that is inherent in her theory and firmly sticks to male and female as the only kinds of sexed bodies in Yorùbá society and the heterosexual couple as the only form of erotic partnership between persons. It should be noted here that allowing for sexual multiplicity is particularly important in the context of African feminist scholarship because of the troubled relationship of most African societies with homosexuality today. Research shows that in the largest parts of Africa sexual minorities are still being denied their fundamental rights and the abuse of LGBT persons is official and institutionalised (Jonas 2013:222). In Nigeria all forms of same-sex unions and same-sex marriage are criminalised. Serious doubts can thus be cast over feminist theory in Africa that is unable and/or unwilling to account for sexual experience and identity outside the heteronormative paradigm.

With regard to the issue of sexual multiplicity, reading Oyěwùmí next to Irigaray and her critics therefore highlights a great strength in Oyěwùmí's theory, namely that it presents an understanding of subjectivity and the social that can, in principle, support and promote sexual multiplicity, even though she does not deal with this issue explicitly. However, at the same time, it also highlights a major weakness in her work, namely her omission of dealing with this topic at all.

## VIII Conclusion

In this chapter my aim was to explore in more detail and through the lens of the work of Luce Irigaray the charges leveled by Oyěwùmí against Western society and thought and the gender dynamics that flow therefrom. It was seen in the previous chapters that Oyěwùmí argues that the rational subject of modern colonial Western thought is an implicitly

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<sup>60</sup> In this sense, Judith Butler's work complements Oyěwùmí's theory well. Butler draws into question the category of woman as existing identity central to feminist theory that constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. She argues famously that 'the inner truth of gender is a fabrication' (Butler 1990: 174). Like gender, sex is a cultural construction that is produced by a performative process. On this basis she asks, if both sex and gender are cultural constructs, why there are only two genders and why should they flow from sex.

masculine and disembodied one, while woman (and the non-Western person) is set up as other of this subject and represents inert materiality, while inert materiality is projected onto all who are different and therefore less than. It is thus a logic in terms of which different from means less than. She argues that through colonialism and colonality this logic was and is injected into Yorùbá society which led and continues to lead to profound distortions of the indigenous culture. Irigaray's metaphysical critique of the Western symbolic order turns on exactly the same premise, namely that it is an order that structures difference hierarchically and dichotomously. Irigaray shows in detail how the Western symbolic order and the colonial/modern gender system are founded on an erasure of difference so that subjectivity and identity are based on sameness to a (implicitly masculine) ideal and that which is different from this ideal (the feminine) serves only as negative. I showed how Irigaray's in depth analysis from a Western feminist perspective supports the claims of Oyěwùmí and deepens our understanding of her criticism of the colonial/modern gender system. Moreover, reading Irigaray next to Oyěwùmí also strengthens and enhances the connection that Oyěwùmí draws between the relational worldviews of precolonial Yorùbá society and the gender equivalence that she argues to have characterised that society. The relational Yorùbá worldsense that Oyěwùmí describes is in many ways similar to the fluid economy that Irigaray formulates as alternative to the sacrificial economy of Western patriarchy. When read through an Irigarayan lens it can be said that Oyěwùmí as well as sub-Saharan relational philosophy present and theorise a world in which the subject does not need a material other to exclude and where subjectivity is constituted in relations to those who are different. Unlike in the sacrificial symbolic order of the West, man is not set up as standard for humanity while woman serves as foil for its emergence.

I also showed with regard to issues of race, subjectivity and sexual multiplicity how reading Irigaray with Oyěwùmí produces new insights with regard to both of their positions. With respect to the issue of race I argued that Oyěwùmí's theory highlights a significant shortcoming in Irigaray's work, namely that she fails to recognise that gender and race are inextricably intertwined in the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order. Irigaray understands the Western symbolic order to operate through only one axis of exclusion or sacrifice and does not take into account that race converges with, intersects and overlaps with gender so that the exclusion of the African woman from the Western symbolic order is different from the exclusion of the Western woman. With regard to subjectivity it was argued that Oyěwùmí's theory problematises Irigaray's sexed universal in so far as it precludes a robust form of relationality between the sexes and in so far as it contradicts the fluidity implied by a relational model of subjectivity. Lastly, I showed how the criticism against Irigaray's theory regarding its failure to take into account and do justice to sexual multiplicity, also underscores Oyěwùmí's problematic silence on these matters, even though her theory in principle offers ways to think of subjectivity in terms of sexual multiplicity. Reading Oyěwùmí and Irigaray alongside each other like this is therefore a remarkably prolific exercise for both sides. It attests to the importance thereof that African and Western feminists enter into dialogue with one another. In the next chapter I build forth on this point by placing Oyěwùmí and Irigaray in dialogue specifically with regard to the issue of motherhood.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# MOTHERHOOD

### I Introduction

In this chapter I explore the theme of motherhood in the work of Oyěwùmí. I show how for her the mother is a figure through which the dichotomies central to the colonial/modern gender system and dominant Western thought (body/mind, immanence/transcendence, nature/culture etc.) are deconstructed in striking and powerful ways. I interpret and theorise Oyěwùmí's understanding of motherhood against the backdrop of sub-Saharan philosophy on relationality and in dialogue with Irigaray to show its implications, power and sophistication. In this chapter, I bring together all the different strands of argumentation of this dissertation as set out in the Introduction, specifically with reference to the theme of motherhood. I therefore place Oyěwùmí in mutual dialogue with Irigaray, on the hand, and sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality, on the other, on the topic of motherhood and show the subversive power of Oyěwùmí's position and the decolonising potential of her work. Again in this chapter, like in the previous chapter, I show how Irigaray, as a dissident voice in Western feminist thought, makes claims that are comparable to Oyěwùmí's claims. Both of them are looking to articulate a position beyond Western metaphysics and both of them stand critical towards those dominant strands in Western feminist thought which uncritically work within the exclusionary or sacrificial logic of Western metaphysics. However, I also argue that once again Oyěwùmí's work can be interpreted to show the ways in which Irigaray fails to move beyond Western metaphysics. I argued in the Introduction and the previous chapter with reference to the theories of Mbembe, Oyěwùmí and Irigaray how the African woman is doubly excluded from the prevalent paradigms and processes of knowledge production on account of race *and* gender. In this chapter it will be seen how, speaking from this doubly repressed epistemological position, Oyěwùmí, through her understanding of motherhood, challenges and has the potential to radically disrupt the dominant strands of Western feminist thought as well as Irigaray's dissident position and lastly, also of sub-Saharan African relational philosophy.

I chose the issue of motherhood here specifically because of firstly, the profound significance attached to it in African feminism and secondly, because African feminist approaches to motherhood are generally so different from the dominant approaches in Western feminist scholarship. Sub-Saharan African scholars emphasise and value motherhood in ways that Western feminists often view with caution and suspicion. Sub-Saharan feminist scholars contrast their approach to motherhood to the dominant approach in Western feminism where motherhood was for a long time dismissed as an inherently oppressive institution that women had to reject in the pursuit of equality. As a result, sub-Saharan feminists generally regard the crucial position of motherhood in their work to be a central and irreconcilable difference between African feminism and Western feminism. Gambian scholar Charles Ebere explains that because of the importance of lineage and descent systems in most African societies, 'giving birth to children is [...] revered as a sacred act that culminates not only in preserving and propagating human life but also in ensuring that the ancestral line is perpetuated' (Ebere 2011: 487). Accordingly, women as producers of life are honoured as mothers even in societies where they are not regarded as equals (Ebere 2011: 487). Similarly, Kenyan feminist scholar Besi Brilliant Muhonja writes that across African cultures mothers and motherhood are afforded reverence (Muhonja 2013:4) and Kenyan

feminist and scholar Achola O. Pala notes that motherhood is a central concept in virtually all African communities (Pala 2013:8). Muhonja comments in this regard that one would have to search long and hard for scholarship within Africa advocating a rejection of motherhood (Muhonja 2013:4). In African societies motherhood is ‘a cultural mandate and a privilege’ (Larrier 1997:193). Ifi Amadiume states that ‘maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies and in all of these societies women are revered as producers and providers because their maternal powers are linked to the earth’s fertility’ (Amadiume 1987: 191). In line with this, there is a strong tendency in the work of the sub-Saharan African feminist scholars to emphasise motherhood as the foundation of a feminine sexed identity and the power of the feminine subject. Ghanaian feminist and theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes for example: ‘[a]t the deep center of a woman’s being, uncontrolled and unknown by any other human being, lies motherhood’ (Oduyoye 1995:143). Motherhood is commonly regarded by African feminists to be the most central identity for African women. They argue for the importance of its retention in opposition to Western feminisms that embrace a less pro-natal stance (Cousins & Dodgson-Katiyo 2012:xx). Bakare-Yusuf writes that ‘[f]or these theorists, motherhood is seen to constitute the symbolic core of a powerful female subject position, which contests what they see as the Western feminist view of women’s social disempowerment and symbolic lack’ (Bakare Yusuf 2003b: 5). Others also work with the symbolism of motherhood, like Catherine Achonolu (1995), a Nigerian feminist who proposes and develops the notion of ‘Motherism’ as an African alternative to feminism which centers the experience of the African woman in the values of motherhood. Motherhood is therefore one of the most important issues in African feminist scholarship<sup>61</sup> and potentially one of the most problematic seen from dominant Western feminist perspectives in terms of which the idealisation of motherhood is often regarded as a patriarchal strategy to tie women to reproductive and domestic roles.

I start this chapter in the next section by looking at De Beauvoir’s understanding of motherhood, I consider De Beauvoir a representative of the kind of Western feminist approach that the African feminist scholars write against. I show how the dominant discourse on motherhood in Western feminism is embedded in the sacrificial economy of Western patriarchy as analysed by Irigaray and discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. In the third section I present Irigaray’s position on motherhood as opposing De Beauvoir’s position, and as presenting an alternative understanding of motherhood within the Western feminist tradition. In the fourth section I provide a detailed exploration of the notion of motherhood in the work of Oyěwùmí to show the way in which it reflects relational, non-dichotomous, fluid metaphysical underpinnings and to highlight the way in which it is a vision that exists beyond the dichotomous approach to the subject and the world that shapes De Beauvoir’s analysis of motherhood. I look at what Irigaray’s work on motherhood can teach us about the implications and strength of Oyěwùmí’s position. In section five I formulate the insights that Irigaray and Oyěwùmí’s theorisations of motherhood underscore about each other’s positions. I also show how Oyěwùmí’s position resonates with sub-Saharan philosophy on relationality, but again, also how it confronts it with its own limitations and silences. In section six I explore the question of whether Oyěwùmí’s

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<sup>61</sup> This overwhelmingly positive and idealising approach to motherhood is sometimes critically investigated in the literary works of some female African writers. See for example Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name* (1994) and *Butterfly Burning* (2000), Buchi Emecheta’s *Joy of Motherhood* (1979) and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) in which different oppressive aspects of such an idealisation of motherhood are explored.

emphasis on motherhood works to justify the stigmatisation of childless women that one often sees in contemporary African societies. In section seven I argue for the decolonising potential of Oyěwùnmí's notion of motherhood. Lastly, in section eight I look at the decolonising potential of Oyěwùnmí's notion of motherhood.

## **II De Beauvoir's analysis of the problem of motherhood in the sacrificial economy of Western patriarchy**

Oyěwùnmí argues that in Western society motherhood is conflated with womanhood (which she argues to be the same as wifehood in Western society, as seen in Chapter One and Chapter Three) and can only be understood through the lens of women's oppression (Oyěwùnmí 2016: 213). She explains that according to this approach, powerlessness and lack of agency are inherent to the definition of motherhood (Oyěwùnmí 2016: 213). Oyěwùnmí argues that 'the contemporary capitalist industrialized societies in which white feminists are located are structured to disregard motherhood' (Oyěwùnmí 2016: 213). As a result, many feminists have bought into the idea that to 'progress' (and here Oyěwùnmí notes that she has no idea what this term is supposed to mean) 'women must discount, minimize, nay eschew motherhood in their lives' (Oyěwùnmí 2016: 213). In order to provide a context from within which to understand these points of criticism of Oyěwùnmí against motherhood in Western feminism and Western society, I briefly outline De Beauvoir's approach to motherhood. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949) De Beauvoir laid the foundation for dominant liberal feminism's rejection of motherhood as well as for the ensuing debate about motherhood in Western feminism. Some sub-Saharan African feminist scholars like Tushabe (2013) and Nzegwu (1994) explicitly contrast their positions on motherhood to De Beauvoir's position. De Beauvoir has therefore to a certain extent become the representative of the Western feminist stance on motherhood that African feminist scholars reject. I present only a simplified account of De Beauvoir's position which is more complex<sup>62</sup> than the way it is in which it is popularly understood and which softened with time (see Oliver [2010: 762-763]). However, it is this simplified account that has come to be generally associated with De Beauvoir in Western feminism and against which African feminist scholars object.

In *The Second Sex* De Beauvoir famously considered motherhood as the main feature that tied women to immanence and which therefore withheld them from becoming full subjects. De Beauvoir uses Hegel's master-slave dialectic to explain how woman is relegated to the position of other in society. Motherhood plays a central role in this regard. According to De Beauvoir, historically, maternity kept women 'wrapped up in the species' while men were free to pursue individuality and transcendence (De Beauvoir 1949:52). She argues that superiority has been accorded in humanity on account of one's ability to serve ends more important than oneself, so that it was risking life rather than giving life that was understood to raise the human above the animal (De Beauvoir 1949:89). Man is thus able to transcend the repetition of life and reproduction and create values that deprive pure repetition of all value (De Beauvoir 1949:89). Although woman too feels the urge to transcend repetition towards a different future, '[h]er misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life' (De Beauvoir 1949:90). De Beauvoir likens man to Hegel's

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<sup>62</sup> See for example Zerilli (1992) who argues that De Beauvoir's dramatisation of the maternal body in process is a sophisticated and underappreciated feminist discursive strategy of defamiliarisation: 'a highly charged, always provocative, and at times enraging restaging of the traditional drama of maternity.'

master who affirms Spirit against Life through risking his own life, while woman represents the other consciousness which is the 'dependent consciousness for whom the essential reality is the animal type of life' (De Beauvoir 1949:90). The difference is that women also aspire to the values pursued by men, but they have been locked up in 'the kingdom of life, of immanence' (De Beauvoir 1949:90). Woman is thus the 'prey of the species' who, like an animal 'remain[s] [...] closely bound to her body' (De Beauvoir 1949:90). Moreover, De Beauvoir argued that because women are made to see motherhood as the essence of their life and the fulfillment of their destiny, the decision to become a mother is never performed in complete liberty (De Beauvoir 1953:696).

De Beauvoir argues that transcendence to subjecthood through motherhood is impossible:

If the flesh is purely passive and inert, it cannot embody transcendence even in degraded form; it is sluggish and tiresome; but when the reproductive process begins, the flesh becomes root - stock, source, and blossom, it assumes transcendence, a stirring towards the future, while it remains a gross and present reality [...] With her ego surrendered, alienated in her body and in her social dignity, the mother enjoys the comforting illusion of feeling that she is a human being *in herself a value*. But this is only an illusion (De Beauvoir 1972:513).

De Beauvoir's understanding of motherhood strikingly reflects the idea that the mother represents inert matter which is inherently opposed to subjectivity. Subjectivity is understood in terms of transcendence of embodiment that is coded masculine. She writes:

Creative acts originating in liberty establish the object as value and give it the quality of the essential; whereas the child in the maternal body is not just justified; it is still only a gratuitous cellular growth, a brute fact of nature as contingent on circumstances as death and corresponding philosophically with it (De Beauvoir 1972:514).

American feminist Susan Hekman regards this to mean that De Beauvoir rejects in no uncertain terms the idea that the maternal can provide the basis for the attainment of subjectivity in so far as it is inherently tied to the realm of immanence and death (Hekman 1999:10). In De Beauvoir's words: '[i]t was fraudulent to maintain that through maternity woman becomes concretely man's equal' (De Beauvoir 1949:525). Here it is important to note that De Beauvoir's stance on motherhood should be understood within the context that she was writing. She wrote *The Second Sex* in the 1940s, in an age where motherhood was regarded to be the most important task of the French woman. After the armistice in June 1940, population decline was cited as a major factor contributing to the defeat of France and as a result familialist ideals were pushed in French politics and legislation (Duchen 1995: 97). Women were urged to contribute to the French state by having children and '[r]aising children was considered to be the summit of a woman's career' (Duchen 1995: 98). During these times a Medal of the French Family was awarded by the French state to women who had five or more children. De Beauvoir's strong views on motherhood should therefore be understood to be shaped by a very specific historical context in which women were defined by and limited to their ability to reproduce and in which the idealisation of motherhood functioned in a very oppressive way.

Central to De Beauvoir's understanding of motherhood is an oppositional construction between self and other. De Beauvoir argues the category of the other to be 'as primordial as consciousness itself' (De Beauvoir 1949:16) and that 'Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought' (De Beauvoir 1949:17). For De Beauvoir the subject can therefore not be thought without the other and for De Beauvoir the other is woman. Hekman explains that De Beauvoir argues that men, who define themselves in opposition to women, are both "'the One," the positive opposed to the negative pole of the "the Other" (women), and, at the same time, the neutral standard that defines humanness itself' (Hekman 1999:2). Thus, woman is both a negative and a lack in so far as she is necessary for the definition of 'the One' and 'at the same time nothing at all, because she fails to measure up to the standard defined by "the One"' (Hekman 1999:2). This is the same point that Irigaray makes and that was discussed in the previous chapter, namely that in the Western symbolic order woman, representing matter, serves as negative foil for masculine subjectivity, but that her role in sustaining the subject is forgotten and repressed and because there is only place for one subject, woman is erased or buried. Hekman explains that this One/other relationship is necessarily unequal in so far as in order to be the One, defined in terms of transcendence and autonomy, the subject must define him or herself in contrast to an other who embodies the opposite qualities, namely immanence and dependence (Hekman 1999:4). Frye writes that in terms of De Beauvoir's understanding of subjectivity '[t]he subject can be posed only in being opposed' (Frye 1996: 993). To gain the transcendence which is a condition for subjectivity man conjures up an 'absolute' other which does not require a reciprocal relation and which he can oppose without it opposing him (Frye 1996: 993). For De Beauvoir this absolute other is woman (as mother), so that one cannot be a woman and a subject (Frye 1996: 993). Frye writes powerfully that it 'is through posing the other – woman – that the subject constructs *himself* ... As One and sovereign, secure and safe' (Frye 1996: 993). Again there are other interpretations of De Beauvoir in which her understanding of the self-other relation is presented in less antagonistic and more nuanced terms.<sup>63</sup> However, I use the interpretation outlined here in so far as it shows the way in which De Beauvoir's thought had been passed onto dominant liberal feminist discourses.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See for example Ursula Tidd (1999) who argues that in De Beauvoir's account of consciousness, the other cannot be a mere object to be transcended in so far as it is already incorporated within the self's movement to transcendence. Similarly, Frederika Scarth (2004) interprets De Beauvoir to say that the category of the other does not necessarily result in domination, and the human aspiration towards asserting subjectivity does not necessarily result in oppression, because it also holds the promise of a reciprocal recognition of the embodied subjectivity of others. Scarth argues that for De Beauvoir the oppressive dynamic between subject and other can be achieved with a recognition that each subject is, also an other, for the other and that each subject accordingly harbors otherness within.

<sup>64</sup> As an aside it should be said that although the De Beauvoirian position was dominant in Western feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, there are many western feminists (aside from Irigaray) who have also attempted to theorise motherhood outside of the traditional patriarchal stereotypes that make it an oppressive choice for women. For example, in her book *Maternal Thinking* (1989) Sarah Ruddick argues that women's activity of mothering provides principles that can be used to formulate a feminist maternal peace politics. Iris Marion Young, in *Throwing like a Girl* (1990) develops a phenomenology of pregnant embodiment that challenges traditional theories of subjectivity and articulates the subjectivity of pregnancy as unique and purposeful. These feminists have therefore revalued motherhood as a valuable identity that must be defended against male control and masculinist values. Other feminists who have been thinking women's empowerment through motherhood are Carol Gilligan (1982) and Julia Kristeva (1986). However, scholars like Gilligan and Ruddick have often been criticised for being conservative in so far as they promote the revival of traditional middle-class conceptions of femininity or, in the words of Genevieve Lloyd, that glorifying female difference in this way may doom women to 'repeat some of the sadder subplots of the history of Western thought' (Lloyd 1984:105). Irigaray and Kristeva have been criticised for the way in which they revalued the pregnant body and maternity which was argued to perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes by identifying the essence of womanhood with maternity (see for example Nye (1989), Fuss (1989) and Butler (1989)). This is only a glimpse into a long and complicated debate, which Oy  w  m   does not engage with at all in her

Irigaray tries, also in her work on motherhood, to move beyond this dichotomy of one/other by pursuing the existence of two *different* but equivalent subject positions. She rejects the model of equality because it ‘presupposes a point of comparison’ and instead she pursues equivalence through difference (Irigaray 1993b:12). In her work Irigaray therefore explicitly tries to subvert Western metaphysics rather than staying within its boundaries. It was seen in the previous chapter that she is not always successful in this endeavour. However, in so far as she is problematising and trying to step outside of the oppressive dichotomous logic of western metaphysics (which De Beauvoir, in terms of popular interpretations of her work, as well as the liberal tradition of Western feminism remains trapped in) she is an interesting conversation partner for Oyěwùmí, also on the topic of motherhood.

### **III Irigaray, motherhood and the undoing of the burial of the maternal feminine**

Motherhood is one of the primary symbols through which Irigaray conceptualises the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order, but also through which she imagines alternatives to this logic. It was seen in the previous chapters that Irigaray symbolises and theorises the idea that the maternal-feminine serves as the other of the subject (and the amorphous foil or outside of identity and discourse in general) in the Western symbolic order through the idea of a fundamental matricide which she identifies in many of the founding texts of the Western symbolic order. In other words, she uses the symbol of a matricide to theorise the way in which materiality and the feminine is sacrificed in the Western symbolic order in favour of the transcendent, the intelligible and the disembodied, and therefore how knowledge, subjectivity and identity are split off from their material foundations. She identifies this matricide in the founding narratives of Western culture, religion and philosophy. In her paper *The Bodily Encounter with the Mother* (1991a) Irigaray argues, counter to Freud, that Western culture is founded on matricide rather than patricide. She reinterprets the myth of Clytaemnestra to show how patriarchy is founded on the sacrifice of mothers and daughters. In the myth Orestes kills his mother, who murdered his father, to avenge his father’s death. After the matricide Orestes goes mad because he is haunted by the Furies, a troop of enraged women, like the ghosts of his mother. However, Apollo defends Orestes from their wrath. Athena, a goddess born from the head of Zeus, intervenes and sets up a jury to decide Orestes’ fate. Apollo convinces Athena that in a marriage, a man is more important than a woman, because Athena herself was born only from a man. Athena acquits Orestes and convinces the Furies to accept the outcome. Irigaray explains that ‘[t]he murder of the mother results, then, in the non-punishment of the son, the burial of the madness of women - and the burial of women in madness - and the advent of the image of the virgin goddess, born of the father and obedient to his law in forsaking the mother’ (Irigaray 1991:38). She writes further:

The problem is that, by denying the mother her generative power and by wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language

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criticism of Western feminist approaches to motherhood. Oyěwùmí’s work on motherhood can therefore be criticised for unduly simplifying and reducing the Western feminist position.



[*langue*] and symbols which cannot take root in it except as in the form of that which makes a hole in the bellies of women and in the site of their identity (Irigaray 1991:41).

Accordingly, the forgetting of the subject's material beginnings and its bond with the mother are central to the founding and maintenance of the sacrificial Western metaphysics with its corresponding notion of the subject. This metaphysics supports an understanding of subjectivity as that which transcends the flesh and its fleshy connection to the (m)other, thereby splitting off the transcendental from the material, the mind from the body and the self from the other. In other words, the maternal feminine represents inert materiality which must be sacrificed or excluded in order to serve as foil for the emergence of subjectivity which is conceptualised as fully disembodied and implicitly masculine. In Lacanian terms then the connection with the mother is severed when a person enters into language and becomes a subject: '[t]he body that gives life never enters into language' (Irigaray 1987:46). As a result 'the mother must remain silent, outlawed' from the social order and culture (Irigaray 1991:14). The dependency and debt to the mother is erased through a forgetting of the maternal beginnings of the subject (Irigaray 1991:15). 'The womb is never thought of as the primal place in which we become body' (Irigaray 1991:16). Irigaray therefore argues that in the Western symbolic order the first relation with the mother is the unthought 'ground constitutive of subjectivity which has been reduced to the empirical or facticity' (Irigaray 2002:74). The material and maternal basis of subjectivity is therefore left unacknowledged and unsymbolised, reduced to something purely corporeal and natural that is not part of the subject.

The result of this on a concrete level for real flesh and blood women is that they are confined to the role of reproduction or 'keepers of the flesh' and excluded from the public and civil spheres. Irigaray writes that motherhood then becomes a 'desubjectivized social role' which 'walls [women] up in the ghetto of a single function' namely that of reproducer (while men produce other things like cultural products) (Irigaray 1987: 18). This means that women have to choose between being women and citizens while men can be fathers *and* civil subjects (Irigaray 1987: 18). This resonates clearly with what De Beauvoir writes. Accordingly, like De Beauvoir Irigaray shows how the mother represents the inert material other to the transcendent and rational (masculine) subject. Irigaray departs from De Beauvoir in that she does not regard this as a problem inherent to motherhood, but as a problem of how Western thought conceives of subjectivity. Instead of rejecting motherhood she argues for the necessity to transform the Western symbolic order so that subjectivity is not dependent on the exclusion of difference, materiality and the maternal body.

In order to transform society in this way the symbolic needs to be shifted and this requires the reversal of the burial of the mother. Irigaray argues that one of the ways in which to transform society is to rethink and remember the connection with the mother. In her work she asks how the symbolic burial of the mother can be undone in order to allow for the emergence of a relational and non-sacrificial kind of subjectivity to which woman/the feminine can also have access. She writes that forgetting the bond with the mother leads to a forgetting of the way in which the subject is embedded in relations with others (Irigaray 2002:74). It was seen in the previous chapter that this is because the subject is posited as that which transcends embodied relations to other embodied beings. Subjectivity is defined in exclusion of that which is other. She writes further: 'the so-called law of the father - which acts in onto-theology, particularly through its conception of unity, of Being, of thinking, of the same - will separate the logos from its carnal taking root, and

above all from its anchorage in the relation with the other' (Irigaray 2002:74). Accordingly, the kind of subjectivity that arises through the forgetting of the bond with the mother is impossibly autonomous, individualistic and invulnerable. Embodied relations with other human beings are regarded as marginal, derivative and secondary to rather than constitutive of subjectivity.

Rethinking the bond with the mother is crucial in dismantling this order in so far as it puts the material into relation with the transcendental, the feminine into relation with the masculine, the self into relation with the other, thereby disrupting the central dichotomies of the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order. Dismantling the sacrificial economy of Western patriarchy thus requires 'consider[ing] the first constituting relation of subjectivity, the relation with the mother, where the body and the spirit remain present and often mingled' (Irigaray 2002:74). Rethinking the subject in terms of this first relation therefore brings the material and the spiritual back together and it situates the subject within constitutive and sustaining relations with the embodied other. To make the unthought ground of subjectivity thought, it is necessary to 'turn back to the relation with the mother in order to dialecticize it in a different way' (Irigaray 2002:75). In order to undo the 'forgetting of difference,' the relation with the mother must be rethought as 'a kind of engendering where the one emerges from the other and the other from the one in a sort of re-covering of all bringing into the world, of all coming into the world' (Irigaray 2002:75). In this way Being becomes 'being in-relation-with' and 'being born-of' (Irigaray 2002:75). Irigaray writes in this regard that the 'human is not made by the other in the manner of a thing, but proceeds from the other as engendered by the other, at the natural and spiritual level' (Irigaray 2002:128). She distinguishes between the relationship between subjects on the one hand and the relationship between a subject and an object on the other:

Whether in his body or in his 'soul,' also called spirit, a man thus originates in an other from whom he has to differ, as mother, and with whom, as woman, he has to find alliance. Being engendered for him does not take place once and for all: the human cannot detach itself from her from whom it is born, like a thing with regard to whoever fabricated it (Irigaray 2002:128).

Acknowledging the subject as being born from a mother and continuously born from material and interdependent relationships therefore centres embodiment, relationality and difference in our understanding of subjectivity. It means that the subject emerges forever from within embodied relations to others who are different. The other, the body and difference are therefore constitutive aspects of the subject that cannot be left behind, transcended, excluded or stripped. In this way the possibility for sexual difference (and all other differences) arises and all kinds of persons can claim subjectivity because subjectivity does not need an other to exclude or erase, but is constituted from within relationships of difference with others. Irigaray develops a fluid, dynamic, relational and non-sacrificial notion of identity through theorising the way in which the mother and the unborn child coexist in a profound interdependence without dissolving into unity (recall for example her work on the placenta [1993b:37-50] and the exchange of breath between mother and child [1999]). Accordingly, Irigaray also employs symbols of maternity and birth to subvert, dismantle and resist on a metaphysical level the symbolic structures in terms of which the maternal feminine is understood in opposition to subjectivity and transcendence. For Irigaray, remembering the material basis of the subject in its maternal beginnings

could therefore potentially bring about a powerful symbolic shift from a sacrificial economy of solids to a non-sacrificial one. The British feminist philosopher Rachel Jones writes: ‘by reassessing our beginnings in birth – and thinking birth specifically as birth from the sexuate body of the mother, rather than a “coming from nothingness” – Irigaray offers both a critique of the Western philosophical tradition and the possibility of an alternative metaphysical horizon’ (Jones 2012: 142).

#### **IV Motherhood in precolonial Yorùbá society**

Oyěwùmí accentuates motherhood as a crucial identity and social role as is seen in the work of the overwhelming majority of sub-Saharan African feminists. She emphasises motherhood in ways that, at first glance, seem at odds with the empowered position of women in her work and her claims about the absence of a dichotomous gender scheme in precolonial Yorùbá society. Oyěwùmí writes that “‘Mother’ is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women’ (Oyěwùmí 2000:1096) and that ‘the model of motherhood is absolutely natural [...] because [it] binds women together in collective experience, it is childbearing and the mothering of children, and consequently the nurturing of the community’ (Oyěwùmí 2003b:5). Oyěwùmí thus grounds the self-identity and position of women in society in their biological capacity to give birth which she argues to be the natural function shared by women. Oyěwùmí argues that it is through her role as nurturer and natural reproducer that woman finds a collective identity with other women. She therefore seems to be essentialising womanhood in a problematic way by tying female identity and agency to reproduction. From a De Beauvoirian perspective this is worrying in so far as it ties female agency to reproduction in a way that precludes the possibility for woman to choose to live in other ways, pursue other things, direct her own becoming and transcend ‘mere’ reproduction. Accordingly, at first glance, one could easily come to the conclusion that Oyěwùmí’s understanding of motherhood places serious limitations on the freedom and power of women, because what it is to be woman is defined with reference to her reproductive capacities. Moreover, the question that arises is how this connects to the rest of her work where she argues that subjectivity in precolonial Yorùbá society was not embedded in a dichotomous gender scheme and that roles in that society were not gendered at all. If the agency and power of women are rooted in their reproductive function, it seems to bring us right back to an essentialist man/woman dichotomy. It is difficult to imagine the fluid and free social dynamics where body type does not determine one’s role and position in society, as described by Oyěwùmí.

However, in this section I argue that Oyěwùmí’s notion of motherhood is not essentialist and does not mean a return to a rigid man/woman dichotomy. Oyěwùmí presents the mother as a figure in which the dichotomies of immanence/transcendence, feminine/masculine, matter/spirit and self/other that are central to De Beauvoir’s critique of motherhood and the subsequent debate about motherhood and essentialism in Western feminism, do not exist. Accordingly, it could be said that there is ‘a different architecture of motherhood’ at stake (Tushabe 2013:24). In this chapter I argue that through her concept of motherhood, Oyěwùmí thinks beyond the structures of colonial modern thought. In so far as this is also what Irigaray is trying to do, their work shows interesting overlaps. In what follows I show how motherhood in the work of Oyěwùmí disrupts and deconstructs the dichotomies of the feminine versus the masculine, self versus other, matter versus spirit, and nature versus culture. Also in this chapter Irigaray’s work will

help to explain and flesh out on a metaphysical level the significance and power of Oyěwùmí's position. She shows how, on a metaphysical level, Oyěwùmí is presenting a model of motherhood outside or beyond the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order. Interpreting Oyěwùmí's perception of motherhood through the lens of Irigaray's metaphysical analysis, highlights the way in which motherhood as presented by Oyěwùmí presents a radical, progressive and sophisticated alternative to motherhood as it features in dominant strands of Western thought and society, an alternative that Western feminism could learn a lot from.

*a) Dissolving the One/other dichotomy*

It can be argued that the understanding of motherhood in Oyěwùmí's work dissolves the boundaries between self and other. This point was also discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Oyěwùmí argues that centering African experiences of motherhood shows that it is not merely an 'earthly institution,' but 'pregestational, presocial, prenatal, postnatal and lifelong' (Oyěwùmí 2003a). She explains that the Yorùbá people believe that even before conception persons (or what would become persons) kneel before the creator and choose their fate (the preordained prospects of life) before coming to earth (through conception and birth) (Oyěwùmí 2016: 60). Fate is also referred to as the *orí*, which literally means head, but is understood to be the seat of individual fate or destiny (Oyěwùmí 2016: 59). The *orí* is also regarded to be a personal god for every person (Oyěwùmí 2016: 59). Oyěwùmí explains that the moment of kneeling in front of the creator to choose a destiny is regarded as one and the same moment (despite occurring at different moments in time) as when the *Iya* kneels to give birth (kneeling is the preferred birthing position of the Yorùbá) (Oyěwùmí 2016: 62). This fusing of events suggests an integration of the *orí* of the *Iya* with that of the person who is born (Oyěwùmí 2016: 62). She writes further that the mother kneeling in birth is one of the most prevalent icons of Yorùbá art that also represents the moment in which one kneels before the creator to choose an *orí* (Oyěwùmí 2016: 59). In this sense the choosing of one's *orí* becomes also the choosing of one's mother, which Oyěwùmí describes as 'the most fateful choice any individual makes' because of the critical role that the *Iya* plays in the child's welfare. Accordingly, one's destiny on earth is in a fundamental sense tied up with one's mother. The mother therefore does not merely constitute the material threshold for entry into the physical world, rather, the encompassing connection with the mother is one that is established at the pregestational moment of choosing one's destiny, it shapes one's existence and persists until after death. This is further emphasised by the fact that the *orí* is understood to be the original source of one's destiny and in moments of danger the first god that one invokes is one's *orí*, followed by an appeal to the *orí* of one's mother through the term *Orí'yaami* which is the 'ultimate cry of alarm, warning and sorrow in Yorùbá society' (Oyěwùmí 2011: 233). The 'destiny' (which is in Western terms typically understood as something that transcends the flesh) of both men and women, is thus fundamentally connected with a vulnerable physical existence that is never cut off from its maternal beginnings. Birth from one's mother is not a moment to be transcended and forgotten in the pursuit of subjecthood and adulthood, but is rather regarded as something which determines one's destiny and from which the subject can never untie itself. The act of invoking the mother's *orí* in moments of pain or desperation attests to an acknowledgment of vulnerability and dependence on others. In this way, the whole community is rooted within motherhood. The implication of this recognition of every person's maternal beginnings is that subjectivity is construed in relational terms

in so far as the subject is understood as being founded in its first connection to an embodied (m)other. Rather than being autonomous and disembodied, subjectivity emerges from within relations with embodied others.

In Irigarayan terms it can be said that the bond with the mother is remembered in a way that enables acknowledgment of the way in which the subject is embedded in relations with others. It is within relationship to the other, rather than through exclusion of the other, that the self exists. Irigaray's metaphysical analysis of Western society helps us to see that this relationality rooted in the bond with the mother is a remarkably difficult strategy to understand and follows from within a Western metaphysical framework which erects itself on a forgetting and denial of the bond with the maternal. This is also seen in Irigaray's failure to entirely escape the logic of western metaphysics in her attempt to construct a relational subject in connection with the mother (as seen in Chapter Four and will be seen further in section five of this chapter). Oyěwùmí's work suggest that in precolonial Yorùbá society the other was part of the structure of the self. Oyěwùmí therefore writes from a context in which the premise central to De Beauvoir's rejection of motherhood, namely that subjectivity needs an other to exclude, is not valid. She therefore conceptualises motherhood outside of the epistemic framework within which De Beauvoir and the feminists following her, are working, where self and other are constructed oppositionally. Because the self is constituted in relation to others, the One of Western modernity is displaced, as well as the concomitant 'forgetting of difference.'

It was seen in Chapter Two that there is also a further aspect of Oyěwùmí's work that can be developed in this regard. She could be interpreted to make an argument for the mother as representative of both masculine and feminine subjectivity: 'the *Iya* figure is representative of humanity – they are the archetypal human being from which all humans derive' (Oyěwùmí 2016:62). She writes that mother is a 'category that encompasses all humanity because all humans derive from them' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 122). She states explicitly that for the Yorùbá the kneeling mother (the Yorùbá birthing position) is the symbol that also represents humanity choosing its destiny in the 'otherworld' and that because mothers have male and female children, motherhood is an 'inclusive category' and mothers are therefore the 'universal representatives of the human' (Oyěwùmí 2011:234). She writes that:

In Yorùbá culture mothers are representative of humanity, ungendered. This Yorùbá conception is in stark contrast to the male-as norm of the Western gendercentric model in which only men can represent universal human attributes (Oyěwùmí 2011:234).

She also explains the image of the kneeling mother as follows:

For the Yorùbá and the traditional artists who created those images [...] they are representing a powerful spiritual pose assumed by the mother, a powerful human being, kneeling in front of the supreme Being, representing each and every member of the human race: her children (Oyěwùmí 2011:234).

Accordingly, rather than motherhood being the opposite of subjectivity, it is exemplary of subjectivity in Oyěwùmí's work. The *Iya* who are deeply connected to their offspring, are portrayed in these passages as representing universal

human subjectivity. Symbolically subjectivity is therefore not envisioned as an autonomous rational soul (coded masculine), but as a mother being connected with offspring in an embodied and spiritual way. Again it can therefore be said that Oyěwù mí therefore posits a subject that is not opposed by an other, but of which the other is part of the structure of the self. I explained in Chapter Two that this can be compared to the way in which Battersby explores an understanding of subjectivity that makes woman rather than man typical of subjectivity and which thinks in terms of relations of dependence in her book *Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (1998). Battersby seeks to formulate a model of identity that is not dependent on the exclusion of that which is other, but one that exists through engagement and in relation with others. I showed how the Yorùbá subjectivity that Oyěwù mí posits closely resembles the subject that Battersby formulates as alternative to the implicitly masculine subject of Western thought and the colonial/modern gender system. The implication is again that Oyěwù mí is conceptualising motherhood in a different framework than the one in which the dominant Western feminist debate on motherhood is currently embedded. Motherhood as a category that represents subjectivity as emerging through engaging with alterity, defies and undermines the dichotomy of self/other. Motherhood is understood in terms of connection, difference, change and multiplicity that cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies. It is one in which otherness is part of the self and where the self is not understood in opposition to its (sexual) other. The figure of the mother in the work of Oyěwù mí therefore defies the categories of masculine and feminine as dichotomous oppositional entities where the latter serves as negative other of the former. It can therefore be argued that through her description and theorisation of Yorùbá motherhood Oyěwù mí, like Irigaray, removes the mother from the sacrificial logic of subjectivity of colonial modernity that structures the De Beauvoirian approach to motherhood.

#### *b) Disrupting the matter/spirit dichotomy*

In this section I look more closely at the way in which Oyěwù mí's conceptualisation of motherhood and the bond with the mother also powerfully deconstructs the gendered matter/spirit dichotomy at the heart of the De Beauvoirian rejection of motherhood in the quest for feminine empowerment. De Beauvoir's theory shows how in the colonial/modern gender system materiality and nature are mapped onto the mother, which then serves as other for the masculine subject. Irigaray's analysis of the Western symbolic order confirms this. In this section I show how the understanding of motherhood in the work of Oyěwù mí completely defies and dissolves the boundaries between matter and spirit so that she is able to emphasise motherhood in the ways she does without it implying the reduction of woman to simply being the keeper of the flesh.

It was seen above how Oyěwù mí roots subjectivity in the material maternal connection, rather than understanding subjectivity as that which transcends the material. Materiality is therefore just as much part of subjectivity as the spiritual. Moreover, I explained in Chapter Two that Oyěwù mí also complicates this by challenging the idea that the connection with the mother is simply material; she instead describes the category of motherhood also as a spiritual category (Oyěwù mí 2016: 216). For the Yorùbá the destinies of mother and child are spiritually conjoined (Oyěwù mí 2016:216) and the mother is regarded as having great spiritual power (Oyěwù mí 2016:128). Moreover, birth (which is usually thought of as a purely physical moment) is also understood as an occurrence with many spiritual aspects.

Oyěwùmí writes that '[t]he relationship between *Iya* and child is a bloody one, and blood is spiritually potent' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 128). The boundaries between matter and spirit are therefore blurred here in striking ways.

In other words, Oyěwùmí deconstructs the matter/spirit dichotomy through the way in which she understands the bond with the mother as being central to subjectivity. This point can be explained with reference to the arguments of Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero. She argues that a 'persistent living for death' is one of the most consistent principles in the philosophical traditions of the West in which the body is understood to be the inert, material prison of the soul (Cavarero 1995:24). Cavarero writes that '[i]n effect the philosopher abandons the world of his own birth in order to establish his abode in pure thought, thus carrying out a symbolic matricide in the erasure of his *birth*' (Cavarero 1995:38). For Cavarero the obsession with death that characterises the Western metaphysical and philosophical enterprise erases the feminine in so far as the essence of the human being is the soul (which is implicitly masculinised). The soul only temporarily resides in the decaying body (which is implicitly feminised). Cavarero explains that in the Western symbolic order, birth is thus claimed by an exclusively masculine biological matrix that is characterised by a body which is destined to die and an intellect which is capable of contemplating the eternal (Cavarero 1995:72). The implication of this is that the mortal body 'draws even its birth from the grief of death' and the intellect falls outside of the scope of birth in so far as it is eternal (Cavarero 1995:72). Accordingly birth is 'limited instead to providing humans with a body, which came from the paternal loins, while their intellect emerged and lived in disembodied regions' (Cavarero 1995:72). In this way, women are reduced to empirical specificity '*which falls outside* the dimension of ideas and signifying power' (Cavarero 1995:52) and the symbolic power of the mother is reduced to a reproductive function for society (Cavarero 1995:67). For Cavarero the key to transformation of the symbolic order lies in shifting the focus from death to birth. Cavarero explains that thinking subjectivity in terms of natality rather than mortality leads to subjectivity being defined by our common origin as having been born (from a woman) and thus being irreducibly concrete and particular, rather than being defined by our finitude and living in 'bewildered isolation' as either or both 'superfluous matter' and 'essential thought' (Cavarero 1995:80).

Understanding subjectivity with reference to birth rather than death thus unties femininity from an exclusive and inherent connection to matter construed as inert or dead and relocates the material to being part of, rather than that which needs to be excluded from, subjectivity. It was seen in the previous section that Oyěwùmí regards the connection to the mother as one of the most central and enduring aspects of being human. She understands it as a connection that forms the basis of subjectivity. In terms of Cavarero's argument it can be said that this understanding of motherhood subverts the sacrificial logic of Western metaphysics in so far as it roots the subject in its maternal beginnings, thereby undermining the idea that subjectivity is that which transcends the body and relations with others. The notion of motherhood in the work of Oyěwùmí is therefore not ensnared in the pernicious gendered mind/body or spirit/matter split, which allows her to emphasise the significance of motherhood without it resulting in the trapping of woman in her flesh and banning her to the shadows of subjectivity. Rather, the material basis of subjectivity is acknowledged and symbolised so that the mother does not present the purely corporeal other of subjectivity, but corporeality is inherent to the subject. In other words, the rational mind is brought back into relation with its carnal conditions in a way that does not leave the maternal feminine as unsymbolised other of the subject.

Oyěwùmí's description of the Yorùbá understanding of birth contains another striking cultural symbol that works to deeply entrench maternal beginnings within the identity of all human beings and which also at the same time powerfully subverts the matter/spirit and body/mind dichotomies that are central to the problematic of motherhood in Western feminist thought. Oyěwùmí provides the following description of the *Iyamapo* (the vagina) which she quotes from ethnographical research that was done by American scholars Joan Westcott and Peter Morton-Williams:

The vagina is [...] called *Iyamapo*, a name that arises from its creative role in molding heads as babies pass through the birth canal. In the Òrìsà pantheon of divinities, there is one named *Iyamapo*. Her role as mother and artist are wonderfully linked. We see this in the yearly festival of *Iyamapo*, a rock-dwelling deity in Igbetti. At the festival, the worshipers sang a song of prayer to the Great Mother that she might never lose the tie (*oja*) that fastens her children, the townspeople, securely on her back. *Iyamapo* is regarded as the tutelary deity of artists, particularly of potters and dyers (Westcott and Morton-Williams 1958: 221 -224).

The vagina is thus understood as actively taking part in the shaping of the child in a process that is understood as creative, natural and divine at the same time. The passage of birth is written into the cultural discourse in a particularly striking way which allows the categories of culture and nature, the spiritual and the physical to intersect. The vagina finds symbolic representation by being made a deity of artists, thus embedding the (pro)creative aspects of the female body in the heart of the cultural life of the Yorùbá and powerfully moving beyond the nature/culture binary that Western metaphysics and patriarchy are built on. Moreover, at the festival of *Iyamapo*, prayers are directed at the Great Mother, situating the vagina as physical, divine and cultural entity within a broader religious framework where the maternal origin of human beings is acknowledged, revered and symbolically represented.

The *Iyamapo* also closely resembles the path between the cave and the outside world that was discussed in Chapter Four in the context of Irigaray's reading of Plato's cave myth. It was seen in the previous chapter that Irigaray argues that in order to undo the symbolic erasure of the maternal feminine, the path connecting the womb and the Idea should be remembered so that the material basis (gendered feminine) of the symbolic can be recognised or remembered. This would enable a non-dichotomous and non-sacrificial construction of the subject and the world. Oyěwùmí's discussion of the *Iyamapo* shows strikingly how the path between immanence and transcendence, between sensible and intelligible, between body and mind is remembered and celebrated in Yorùbá society. In Irigaray's words it can thus be said that through the Yorùbá symbol of the *Iyamapo* the opposition between matter and spirit is dissolved in a way that enables a form of subjectivity in which the material/maternal/feminine is not sacrificed but central to subjectivity. Symbolically the mother is not the other of the subject, but rather represents the universal, relational subject. The deification of the path between the womb and the outside world reflects a symbolic structuring of subjectivity and the world that is not dependent on a division of labour between the material (coded feminine) and the spiritual (coded masculine). De Beauvoir's analysis of how motherhood ties women to their bodies and is therefore not applicable to Oyěwùmí's description of precolonial Yorùbá motherhood in so far as matter and spirit are not oppositionally construed. Motherhood as described by Oyěwùmí breaks through these categories. Moreover, Oyěwùmí's



understanding of motherhood reflects an approach to subjectivity and the world in which difference, ambiguity, multiplicity and change are not understood to undermine being, subjectivity and identity. The result is that difference is enabled and subjectivity is not established or determined with reference to sameness.

c) *Disrupting the nature/culture dichotomy*

The point made in this section is closely related to the point made above about the *Iyamapo*. Oyěwùmí writes that the ‘relationship between *Iya* and art in the Yorùbá imagination is compelling’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 66). She writes that ‘creativity (making art) and procreativity (forming babies) are linked and portrayed as rooted in the same source. *Iya* is at the center of both’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 66). The practices and symbolism of *Iya* is connected to aesthetics. At stake here is specifically the physical birthing process and the postpartum care of the infant, which are collectively referred to as *onayiya* (making art) (Oyěwùmí 2016: 67). She writes that ‘[p]ostpartum care of the infant in the first months of life requires a beautiful shape’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 67). Oyěwùmí writes further in this context that children are regarded as living art which the mother has a central role in producing (Oyěwùmí 2011: 236). She also argues that the dominance of females as creators of *oríkí* (praise poetry) and shrine paintings flows from their unique role as mothers (Oyěwùmí 2011: 236). *Oríkí* is used by mother to ‘praise, to build up, to adorn their children and raise their self-esteem’ (Oyěwùmí 2011: 236). The ritual of painting and renewing the shrines is regarded to serve as a bond that unites members of a particular lineage and mothers are charged with this task (Oyěwùmí 2011: 236).

In Oyěwùmí’s account the mother is therefore positioned as a cultural creator in Yorùbá culture, in a way that blurs the role of artist and mother. This collapses the distinction between women as natural reproducers and men as cultural producers seen in the De Beauvoirian approach to motherhood. The same creative energy and intelligence infuses the making of babies and the making of art/culture. In terms of Oyěwùmí’s account motherhood thus encompasses more than bringing only children into the world. In respect Oyěwùmí is close to Irigaray, who analyses the situation in Western patriarchy as follows:

We bring many things into the world apart from children, we give birth to many other things apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political, things, religious things, but this kind of creativity has been forbidden to us for centuries. We must take back this maternal creative dimension that is our birthright as women (Irigaray 1991:18).

By showing how motherhood is linked to art in Yorùbá society, Oyěwùmí is sketching a world in which this maternal creative dimension is recognised and celebrated in society.

d) *Disrupting the masculine/feminine dichotomy*

Up to this point Oyěwùmí's way of thinking motherhood beyond the dichotomies in which gender and motherhood are embedded in colonial modernity, has been very much in line with Irigaray's position. However, just like was seen in Chapter Four, Oyěwùmí also goes beyond Irigaray. She does this by theorising motherhood outside of the man/woman or masculine/feminine duality. Oyěwùmí argues that there is no male equivalent to motherhood in Yoruba society and culture, and because of that motherhood transcends gender (Oyěwùmí 2016). It was seen in the previous chapters that Oyěwùmí regards gender as a Western construct in which two categories that are inevitably hierarchical and are oppositionally constructed. She explains that motherhood falls outside of this dichotomy and is an 'ungendered' position: '[g]ender by definition is a binary, the categories often defined in opposition to each other. But there is only one *Iya*' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 52). In her recent book *What Gender is Motherhood?* Oyěwùmí uses the word *Iya* instead of mother and refers to the *Iya* with the plural pronouns as 'they' and 'them' in order to avoid gendering the category as feminine in her text by using gendered pronouns like 'her' and 'she.' She argues that in the Yorùbá world sense motherhood is 'a singular category,' 'unparalleled by any other' and therefore 'ungendered' (Oyěwùmí 2004: 232). It therefore does not fit into one side of a man/woman or mother/father dichotomy. In other words, *Iya* is not the 'woman' nor the counterpart of man (Oyěwùmí 2016: 52) and therefore above all not 'wife'. Oyěwùmí contrasts this to Western accounts in which 'mother is reduce[d] [...] to a gendercategory' in so far as 'mother is represented as a woman first and foremost' (which means for Oyěwùmí a category that is the negative of man and therefore inherently disadvantaged and oppressed) (Oyěwùmí 2004: 232). In other words, even though it is clear from her work that she does maintain that only women can be mothers, she seems to be situating the boundaries of the category of motherhood beyond feminine identity as one side of the hierarchical gender binary. She also argues that '[f]rom an African perspective and as a matter of fact, mothers cannot be single' in so far as '[i]n most [African] cultures, motherhood is defined as a relationship of progeny, not as a sexual relationship to a man' (Oyěwùmí 2002:5). She writes that '*Iya* are connected to all their birth children similarly without any distinction made of the type of genitalia they may have' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 59). The mother is therefore not conceptualised as being the female counterpart of the father. Rather, *Iya* are thought in terms of their relation with their offspring, which could be of any gender. Motherhood is therefore not embedded in, but transcends, the man/woman dyad.

Moreover, Oyěwùmí writes further that the '*Iya*/child dyad is the nucleus of family relations and indeed human society' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 70). It was seen in the previous chapters that Oyěwùmí holds that the 'most fundamental social unit' in Yorùbá society is matricentric – 'consisting of *Iya* and their children' (Oyěwùmí 2016:53). With this she means that instead of the singular autonomous (implicitly masculine) subject being the basic building block of human society, or the man-woman couple (where in colonial modernity the woman is subsumed under the category of man), it is the *Iya*-child pair. Every human is born from, and inextricably connected to, the *Iya*, and thus the subject cannot be understood in isolation from this relationship. Motherhood is therefore part of subjectivity in a way that transcends the man/woman relationship. In terms of the origin story of the Yorùbá (the myth of Oseetura), human society begins from a founding *Iya* and her children (see Oyěwùmí 2016: 41-42). She contrasts this to the Judeo-Christian myth of origin in terms of which human life starts with a man/woman couple (Adam and Eve) and in which male dominance is promoted (Oyěwùmí 2016: 71). Oyěwùmí writes that *Iya* is 'a singular, incomparable category' and that it is ungendered because 'there is no twosome here' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 122).

According to Oyěwùmí, precolonial Yorùbá motherhood therefore breaks through the gender binary. It is a subject position, role or identity that is not conceptualised with reference to the difference between man and woman, but with reference to the connection between mother and children. Because the *Iya* is not defined in opposition to a male counterpart (the father) it is a singular category that exists in relation to the many. In this sense Oyěwùmí does not understand motherhood as something that contributes to or detracts from woman's empowerment. Being a mother does not imply being a woman (as a being that stands in a particular relationship to man), it constitutes a position that extends beyond the boundaries of womanhood as it is defined by colonial modernity. In this way Oyěwùmí is more radical than Irigaray. In articulating motherhood beyond the dichotomous logic of colonial modernity, she also leaves behind the two basic categories of man and woman.

*e) Motherhood as multiplicity*

A final important aspect of motherhood as it features in the work of Oyěwùmí is that motherhood 'is not one thing; rather, it suggests a multiplicity of possibilities for social categorization' (Oyěwùmí 1997:161). Oyěwùmí refers to economic, spiritual and artistic dimension of motherhood. She writes for example that becoming an *Iya* in Yorùbá society did not imply domestication, but carried with it the responsibility to go out into the world and generate an income in order to care for the child on a material level (Oyěwùmí 2016: 74). It was seen above that Oyěwùmí thinks of the mother as a spiritual category, but, closely related, also as an artistic one. Moreover, it will be seen later in this chapter that she writes about the leadership potential of motherhood. She therefore presents motherhood as a space of intersecting and multiple identities and powers that is therefore broader and more complex than what the term is usually assumed to connote in dominant Western thinking and in feminist scholarship. In terms of this understanding motherhood is not inherently tied to nature, immanence, the body and the private but is a medium through which women access economic, spiritual and political power of the kinds that in the Western society and symbolic order are associated with masculinity and reserved for men. It could be argued that this kind of multiplicity becomes possible when the category of motherhood is freed from its association with the body, nature, immanence and the private. When Oyěwùmí emphasises motherhood as a crucial role and identity in society, she therefore does not refer to only a domestic nurturing role, but a role that encompasses many other things.

In order to illustrate this point I briefly outline a few religious narratives about Yorùbá divinities. These narratives show motherhood is not an identity that excludes other strengths. Accordingly, in these narratives women do not have to choose between motherhood and other aspects of themselves. The goddesses<sup>65</sup> and priestesses of many Africa cultures are also entrepreneurs, healers, leaders and warriors at the same time as being celebrated for being mothers. Òṣun, for example, is the most popular of the Yorùbá goddesses and is the sovereign ruler of the town of Oshogbo

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<sup>65</sup> Oyěwùmí herself would not use this gendered term, but would rather think of these divinities in ungended terms, like she thinks of the *Iya*. However, because these divinities are referred to as goddesses in the descriptions by Olajubu, Matory and Bádéjò which I used in this section, I do so too in this section. But, in my description of them it would become clear on what basis they could also be understood in ungended terms.

(Olajubu 2004: 51). Òṣun is the creative spirit and represents the spiritual dimension of pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing, thus making her essential to procreation (Olajubu 2004: 51-52). Although Òṣun's power is located largely in her role in guaranteeing procreation and she is described with reference to her role as mother, she is also known for her sacred knowledge and protective powers, as well as her strengths and skills as warrior (Olajubu 2004: 52). Her power is thus multifaceted and includes aspects that are conceptualised as masculine in the Western binary understanding of gender. Accordingly, being a mother thus does not preclude being hard and fierce or having sacred knowledge (Olajubu 2004: 52). Another example would be Yorùbá goddess of the river Ogun who is a protector to all 'her children' and is depicted as being more powerful than feared masculine gods. She is depicted as a mother but is regarded as occupying a central position of power in the patriarchal structures of Oyo Yorùbá society and is a source of autonomy, power, safety and order in the regime (Matory 2005:150-151).

In these descriptions of goddesses and priestesses, their power is understood to spring from the profound potential of motherhood, although their identities are hybrid and pluralistic and are not exhausted by motherhood at all. The fact that motherhood is a source of great mystical power does not exclude other roles and strengths, including the kind of strength that is associated with masculinity (Bádéjò 1998: 99). These religious figures thus offer an example in terms of which women can be mothers and beautiful women who bathe in fine oils and at the same time be ready to draw swords, without it being a contradiction (Bádéjò 1998: 100). Nigerian feminist scholar Bádéjò argues that this is reflected in the social structure of many African societies and explains that African women take on many roles and positions, including *ohenema*, *oba obìnrin* (female ruler), *iyalode* (mother of the outer spaces), *iyaloja* (mothers of the marketplace), and *obìnrin egbe* (women's society or sisterhood) (Bádéjò 1998:101). She writes:

As social agents, our foremothers and sisters lived within the iconography and philosophy that stressed their roles as political and religious rulers, healers, and military personnel, wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends. Such iconography and philosophy authorized their ability to activate the full ranges of sanctioned feminine powers for the protection of their people (Bádéjò 1998: 100).

In these evocations of goddesses and priestesses motherhood does not only encompass a limited set of qualities that stand in a binary and hierarchical relationship to a different set of masculine/male qualities. It therefore becomes even clearer that when Oyěwùmí describes motherhood as the 'preferred and cherished self-identity of many African woman' (Oyěwùmí 2000:1096) she is not essentialising woman and reducing her to her womb, but referring to an identity that is open, plural and fluid.

## **V Consequences for subjectivity**

### *a) Motherhood outside of dichotomy: reading Oyěwùmí through an Irigarayan perspective*

Like Irigaray, Oyěwùmí therefore presents an image of the maternal feminine as existing beyond the dichotomous structures of colonial modern Western metaphysics. Both Irigaray and Oyěwùmí conceptualise motherhood in a way

that disrupts and deconstructs the dichotomies that shape the De Beauvoirian understanding of motherhood. It was seen that De Beauvoir's analysis is founded in the assumption that subjectivity needs an other to sacrifice or exclude. In the Western patriarchal order this other is necessarily the feminine-maternal which also represents the material, the immanent and the natural. It was seen that De Beauvoir's analysis and understanding of motherhood takes this as point of departure. She argues (from within the specific context of postwar France where womanhood was conflated with motherhood, as explained above) that the mother is inherently the other to subjectivity and accordingly, to become a subject, woman must untie herself from maternity. Only through freeing themselves from motherhood and thereby making their own transcendence possible, can women overcome their subordination (De Beauvoir 1949:717). This approach to motherhood reflects the dichotomies that are central to and defining of the sacrificial logic of Western patriarchy as analysed by Irigaray and discussed in the previous chapter including self/other, transcendent/immanent, intelligible/sensible, mind/body, culture/nature etc. For De Beauvoir motherhood fits into the second and inferior terms or categories of these dichotomies that serve as negative for the first terms. Motherhood therefore inevitably confines woman to the position of material, sensible, corporeal other of the subject.

Reading Oyěwùmí in discussion with Irigaray's analysis of the position of the maternal feminine in the Western symbolic order, underscores the power of Oyěwùmí's notion of the *Iya*, and how it deconstructs all the dichotomies in which motherhood is embedded in the Western symbolic order and which are central to the sacrificial logic of this order. Irigaray's work can be interpreted to underline the way in which Oyěwùmí's understanding of motherhood presents a vision beyond the colonial/modern gender system. It contests the inevitability of the dichotomies of this system in which the dominant Western feminist debate on motherhood has remained ensnared. It is radically different from the dominant understanding of motherhood in Western thought and culture because it is anchored in a different construction of subjectivity and the world. In her presentation of motherhood the question of essentialism becomes irrelevant because the hardened/sedimented dichotomies in which the debate is cast (mind/body, spirit/matter, transcendence/immanence, masculine/feminine) are absent. The mother is a category that extends beyond womanhood, a category that is material and spiritual at the same time, that encompasses self as well as other and represents subjectivity with alterity at its core. Oyěwùmí's work suggests that in order to transform motherhood in the colonial/modern gender system it is necessary and possible to rethink the subject in non-sacrificial terms. In this way Oyěwùmí's work, like Irigaray's work, challenges the complicity of dominant strands of Western feminism in maintaining these dichotomies in its theorisations of motherhood.

Reading Irigaray with Oyěwùmí on the topic of motherhood therefore shows important overlaps between Irigaray and Oyěwùmí's theories and illuminates the significance of Oyěwùmí's stance. On the other hand, it can be said that Oyěwùmí's work on motherhood enhances Irigaray's work in so far as she offers a concrete example of what motherhood beyond the sacrificial logic of Western metaphysics could look like. It was seen that she presents precolonial Yorùbá culture as a culture that celebrates and reveres the 'first constituting relation of subjectivity, the relation with the mother, where the body and the spirit remain present and often mingled' (Irigaray 2002:74). Irigaray asks how we can think motherhood, femininity and female embodiment outside of the dichotomous scheme of the Western symbolic order wherein the mother represents the inert material other to the transcendent and rational

(masculine) subject. Oyěwùní shows in concrete terms what it would mean to undo the burial of the maternal feminine. Irigaray writes that ' [w]e [...] need to find, rediscover, invent the words, the sentences that speak of the most ancient and most current relationship we know – the relationship to the mother's body, to our body – sentences that translate the bond between our body, her body' (Irigaray 1991: 19). Oyěwùní's work suggest that the Yorùbá language is a language in which this relationship is alive and can be articulated. In Irigaray's words it can be said that in her theorisation of precolonial Yorùbá motherhood Oyěwùní 'give[s] life back to [the] mother, to the mother who lives within us and among us' (Irigaray 1991:18). In this sense her work raises the question of why Irigaray did not look beyond her own culture for examples of the kind of order she is pursuing. Irigaray suggests that this kind of society could have existed 'prehistorically' (Irigaray 1993b: 24-25), but gives no thought to precoloniality. Oyěwùní describes in concrete terms what Irigaray envisions only abstractly as utopic alternative to the Western symbolic order. Oyěwùní's theory could therefore constitute a rich source to further develop her theories.

Lastly, Oyěwùní's work on motherhood also again brings up the issue of the man/woman duality in Irigaray's work. It was seen in this chapter and the previous chapter that, like Irigaray, Oyěwùní places the subject in relation to alterity. However, unlike Irigaray, Oyěwùní does not think this relationship in terms of the difference between man and woman. It was seen above that Oyěwùní theorises motherhood as well as subjectivity outside of the man/woman duality. It was also seen that Oyěwùní regards the mother-child relationship, rather than the man/woman relationship to be the most fundamental relationship to subjectivity and society. This offers a surprising alternative to the way in which Irigaray thinks subjectivity with reference to the two of sexual difference. Oyěwùní's work on motherhood suggests that a non-sacrificial notion of subjectivity can be thought without depending on the man/woman duality. In other words, Oyěwùní offers a construction of subject and society in which the mother does not present inert materiality and is not erased, without relying on the categories of man and woman. In fact, for her discarding of the categories of man and woman *creates* the possibility of unburying the maternal-feminine in so far as the categories of man and woman limit subjectivity to a sacrificial dichotomy.

Here it is interesting that, similar to Oyěwùní, Irigaray also uses the relation between the mother and child to conceptualise the relational understanding of subjectivity that she is pursuing. Her emphasis is specifically on the placenta, which she posits as a representation of her notion of relational identity that relies on separation just as much as alliance (Irigaray 1993b:37-50). The placenta separates mother and unborn baby and prevents fusion between them, while also facilitating exchange. Accordingly, it plays a mediating role between mother and child *in utero*. In *Je, Tu, Nous*, Irigaray asks French biologist Helene Rouch to explain the mediating role of the placenta. Rouch answers as follows:

On the one hand, it's the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means that there's never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms, not merely quantitatively regulating the exchanges (nutritious substances from mother to fetus, waste matter in the other direction), but also modifying the maternal metabolism: transforming, storing, and redistributing maternal substances for both her own and the fetus' benefit. It thus establishes a relationship

between mother and fetus, enabling the latter to grow without exhausting the mother in the process, and yet not simply being a means for obtaining nutritious substances (Irigaray 1993b:39).

In the placental economy self and other function, survive and become in a system of mutual exchange, without fusing into one. The placental economy is therefore a profoundly relational one in so far as self and other exist not in opposition to each other but through exchange with one another. Irigaray argues that thinking identity in terms of the placental economy allows us to 'free ourselves from competitive combat at the level of existence' by embracing 'interrelationality' (Irigaray 1993b:37). Irigaray therefore uses the placental economy to rethink an alternative to the accounts of subjectivity that regard it to emerge from oppositional and adversarial relationships with an other. Green explains that through mediating the self and not-self that exist in the same bodily space, the placenta allows self and other, inside and outside, to overlap (Green 2011:147). However, at the same time, in the placental economy the intersubjective exchanges and the interrelationality are dependent on the separation between self and other. It is a negotiation between self and not-self. These relations are not in a state of fusion, but organised in a way that is 'respectful to the life of both' (Irigaray 1993b: 38). Rouch explains that because of the relative autonomy of the placenta and its regulatory functions that ensures the growth of one in the body of the other, the relationship between mother and unborn child cannot be reduced to a mechanism of fusions ('an ineffable mixture of the bodies or blood of mother and fetus') or to one of aggression ('the fetus as foreign body devouring from the inside') (Irigaray 1993b: 39). Relation between self and other is therefore neither one of sameness or of complete otherness, but a negotiation between self and other that enables both to exist and become.

Similar to Oyěwùmí, Irigaray therefore also uses motherhood to understand relational subjectivity. However, for Irigaray it is crucial that relations between subjects do not lead to fusion of their identities, but that each subject can live in connection with the other without losing the possibility to return to itself and therefore of maintaining a differentiated subject position. Halsema explains that for Irigaray this separation between the sexes is a requirement for the possibility of growth and becoming of both sexes in so far as it makes sure that one sex does not only appropriate the other sex for its own becoming (Halsema 1998:195). Accordingly, similar to Oyěwùmí, Irigaray uses the mother to conceptualise relational subjectivity, but in Irigaray's work this relationality requires a framework of irreducible sexual difference which facilitates an approach to the other as other rather than sliding into a state of fusion. Only when man and woman acknowledge the limit between them can they establish a truly intersubjective relationship in which they become through exchange with each other. In other words, Irigaray still regards it necessary to place an ontological divide between masculine and feminine subjectivity and is not satisfied with simply thinking subjectivity as an relation of alterity (outside of the man/woman dyad) as symbolised by the figure of the mother, as Oyěwùmí does. Oyěwùmí's work can therefore be argued to raise the question of whether Irigaray is right in this regard, in other words, whether it is necessary to fix subjectivity as either masculine or feminine, rather than just thinking subjectivity in terms of the mother-child relation as mediated by the placenta, thus a subject that exists in profound relation (without fusion) with the other. This brings us again to the question that crystallised in the previous chapter, namely whether Irigaray is right when she holds that two subjectivities need to come into existence in order to transform the current symbolic order in which the feminine is erased and subjectivity is implicitly masculine. In this sense Oyěwùmí and Irigaray could be said

to be writing at different levels and out of different contexts. Oyěwùmí is describing a precolonial society in which the feminine is not erased and in which neutrality does not imply masculinity. Irigaray on the other hand, is asking from within the existing Western patriarchal order what the *conditions* are for undoing the erasure of the feminine. In other words, Irigaray works from the premise that in order to get to a point where the kind of society Oyěwùmí presents is possible, we need to transform the current order by undoing the erasure of the feminine-maternal and that requires strategically working with the categories of masculine and feminine.

However, even if one understands them to be working at these two different levels, it still does not answer the question of whether Irigaray is indeed right when she argues that we need to think in terms of the two of sexual difference to transform the sacrificial logic of colonial modernity. Oyěwùmí's work raises the question whether thinking alterity outside of the man/woman or masculine/feminine duality does not have the same transformative potential to enable the emergence and existence of difference than Irigaray's critique of Western subjectivity, which, in its focus on sexual difference, fails to escape the logic of Western subjectivity. In other words, does Oyěwùmí's centering of the 'ungendered' mother-child relationship in subjectivity and society not present a way of thinking of the subject in a non-sacrificial relationship to alterity as a viable alternative to Irigaray's strategy of working through the irreducible difference between the masculine and feminine subject? This question is even more relevant if one considers that Irigaray already uses the figure of the mother to understand relational identity in a way that does not require thinking in terms of the man/woman dyad (in so far as the mother exists in relation to children of all sexes).

It could be argued that Oyěwùmí's work does indeed present such a viable alternative. I explained in Chapter Two that Battersby reimagines subjectivity in a way that corresponds strikingly to Oyěwùmí's relational Yorùbá subject in an attempt to construct an alternative metaphysics of becoming, in which a feminine subject position becomes possible because subjectivity does not need an other to exclude. Battersby argues that rethinking subjectivity on the model of motherhood, as Oyěwùmí does, will enable women to become full blown subjects because it will mean that '[m]othering, parenting and the fact of being born [will] become fully integrated into what is entailed in being a human "person" or "self"' (Battersby 1998:2). Selfhood would be attained through embodied relationships of dependence that break open the singularity, autonomy and exclusivity of the implicitly masculine subject of colonial modernity. Battersby's work can therefore be interpreted to make a convincing case for the transformative power of Oyěwùmí's ungendered matricentric construction of subjectivity and society as an alternative to Irigaray's emphasis on sexual difference in terms of the two, even in the Western context. This is because the respect for alterity that is needed to avoid the erasure of the feminine, is inherent to Oyěwùmí's notion of the mother as model for subjectivity. Oyěwùmí, like Battersby, thinks the other as part of the self, so that alterity can flourish without fixing it within the man/woman dyad.

*b) Relationality in sub-Saharan African philosophy and the matricentric construction of the subject and the world*



I argued in Chapter Two that the work of Oyěwùmí could be read to reflect a relational understanding of the subject and the world that is comparable to the sub-Saharan African tradition of relational thought and metaphysics. This means that for Oyěwùmí subjectivity and the world are not conceived of in terms of dichotomies, but in terms of a complex and fluid play of difference. I argued that for Oyěwùmí, just as for many sub-Saharan African philosophers, mind and body, culture and nature, the transcendent and the immanent and the self and the other are understood as co-constitutive terms existing in fluid and dynamic connection. The self is constituted in relation with others and is not conceptualised as an essentially autonomous rational being. Rather than dichotomy, hierarchy, unity and singularity, the Yorùbá subject, and the subject of many other sub-Saharan African societies, according to sub-Saharan African philosophy, are constituted in relation to others and characterised by concepts like flow, change and multiplicity. Up to this point, I have been mostly emphasising the way in which Oyěwùmí's work resonates with, reinforces, complements and enhances the theorisation of the relational subject of sub-Saharan philosophy, and vice versa. However, in this chapter it becomes clear that there is a crucial difference between the relationality in Oyěwùmí's work and the way in which it is theorised in sub-Saharan African philosophy. Oyěwùmí roots the relationality of the subject in the first relationship with the mother, while the mother is surprisingly completely absent from sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality.

I made the point above that I read Oyěwùmí to posit the relationship with the mother as a core element of subjectivity so that the subject cannot be thought in isolation of the other. In other words, the foundation for the relational subjectivity seen in Oyěwùmí's work is the first relation in which every person finds herself, namely the relation to the mother. Like the relational subject of sub-Saharan philosophy, the Yorùbá subject as described by Oyěwùmí is not singular and unified, and it does not have clear boundaries that separate it from what is other. Otherness is not thought as antithetical to the self, but part of the self. This is further reflected by the way in which Oyěwùmí posits the mother as representative of the subject. This notion of subjectivity reflects the central ideas of the conceptualisation of relationality in sub-Saharan African philosophy in so far as it means that Oyěwùmí thinks subjectivity in fundamentally relational and plural terms. The subject does not exist singularly, as an island, but always and inevitably in connection to the other. Also, similar to many sub-Saharan African philosophers, as explained in Chapter Two, Oyěwùmí does not think of society as a collection of individual subjects, but as a network of intersubjective relations. It was seen that she argues the bond between mother and child as foundational to all societal relations. I explained that Oyěwùmí writes that the '*Iya*/child dyad is the nucleus of family relations and indeed human society' (Oyěwùmí 2016:70). Oyěwùmí also writes that the 'most fundamental social unit' in Yorùbá society is matricentric – 'consisting of *Iya* and their children' (Oyěwùmí 2016:53). With this she means that instead of the singular (implicitly masculine) subject being the basic building block of human society, it is the mother-child pair. This is because every human is born from, and inextricably connected to, the *Iya*. Rather than thinking of society as a collection of individual subjects, she argues that the precolonial Yorùbá people did not think of the subject in isolation of connections to persons and especially not in isolation of the most fundamental and profound connection, namely that with the mother. The subject of precolonial Yorùbá society as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí is therefore inherently relational, like the subject one sees in sub-Saharan philosophy. However, the difference between the way in which Oyěwùmí theorises this relationality and the way in which it is theorised in sub-Saharan African philosophy, is that Oyěwùmí grounds the relationality of

subjectivity in the fact that the self exists always already in relation to the (m)other, or that subjectivity is rooted in maternal beginnings. In contrast, it could be said that mainstream sub-Saharan African philosophy on personhood mimics Western philosophy's erasure of the maternal body.

Oyěwùmí's work suggests that the important position accorded to motherhood in what seems to be almost all sub-Saharan African societies might have something to do with its role in the relational construction of subjectivity. Interestingly, in her research on the Igbo of Nigeria, Nzegwu confirms this idea by explicitly connecting the notion of relational identity in Igbo society with this emphasis on maternal beginnings by arguing that the relationship with the mother 'coordinates the formation of interpersonal experiences that helps the child define him or herself in relation to others' (Nzegwu 2004: 12). Accordingly, Nzegwu argues the intersubjective and interrelational mother-child relationship to be the model for relationships among all persons. The communal ontology of the Igbo people is then rooted in the notion of motherhood. Nzegwu explains further that disloyalty to the mother or 'the breakage of the uterine ties of kinship' is 'tantamount to destroying the last covenant that makes our community human' (Nzegwu 2004: 12). This implies that the radical acknowledgement of the bond with the mother creates a certain kind of subject that does not view itself as an autonomous individual, but as an inherently dependent and interrelational one. Humanness or subjectivity is thus defined directly with reference to maternal beginnings which remain deeply significant to personhood throughout one's life. In this way it can be said that the understanding of motherhood and the profound importance of maternal beginnings for subjectivity is suggested to be both enabled by and supportive of a relational understanding of subjectivity. The idea is thus that this approach to motherhood not only reflects but also gives rise to a relational, fluid, non-dichotomous understanding of subjectivity in so far as subjectivity is understood to be rooted in embodied human relationships.

I explained in Chapter Two that Oyěwùmí's work forms a basis from which to critique the implicit masculine bias of the gender neutral relational subject of African philosophy in so far as such an exclusionary approach contradicts the fluidity and plurality of relational subjectivity. Another point that comes to the fore here in this chapter is the question why sub-Saharan African philosophers have not yet explored the role of the connection with the mother in relational subjectivity. It was seen that motherhood is revered in most sub-Saharan African societies. It is therefore possible and maybe even likely that the connection to the mother plays a role in the symbolism and construction of relational subjectivity in many other societies too. However, in sub-Saharan African philosophy the mother is just as absent as in Western philosophy. The connection with the mother therefore presents a potentially interesting and crucial aspect of sub-Saharan relational subjectivity that is still unexplored in sub-Saharan philosophy. Western scholars like Irigaray (1985a, 1991b), Kristeva (1969, 1977), Le Doeuff (1980, 1986) and Walker (1998) have worked to reveal the way in which 'the maternal body occupies the site of a radical silence in the texts of Western philosophy' (Walker 1998: 1). Oyěwùmí's work suggests that it might be fruitful and important for sub-Saharan African feminist scholars to take on a similar project of exploring sub-Saharan African philosophy to determine the place and the role of the mother in the construction of the relational subject of sub-Saharan Africa. Although African feminist scholars have been writing extensively about motherhood (see for example Sudarkasa [1994], Nnaemeka [1994], Nzegwu [2004], Semley [2012],

Muhonja [2013], among many others) they have not yet explored and analysed the relevance of motherhood in sub-Saharan African philosophical constructions of subjectivity.

## **VI Motherhood as political, symbolic category exceeding biological reproduction**

So far I have shown that for Oyěwùní motherhood is a category of multiplicity and fluidity, one that defies categorisation and one that cannot be reduced to one essential meaning. The question that I raise in this section is whether this category is only applicable and open to women who have given birth to children, which would justify the marginalisation and stigmatisation of childless women that one sees in many contemporary African societies. Nigerian literary scholar Remi Akujobi writes that in African societies and cultures there exists the belief that ‘motherhood is an essential part of being a woman, outside which the woman is empty’ (Akujobi 2011: 4). She also writes the following:

It is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the ‘halo of maternity’ shines over her. This holds true for most women in Africa where the index of motherhood is used to define ‘real’ women or responsible women. This is so in the sense that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance, many non-mothering women experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem (Akujobi 2011:4).<sup>66</sup>

Akujobi therefore illuminates the dark side of the celebration of motherhood in African societies, namely that it often leads to the stigmatisation of women who are incapable of or unwilling to have children. This is a theme that is widely written about in African scholarship (in critical as well as merely descriptive ways). John Mbiti writes for example that a barren woman is the ‘dead end of human life’ (Mbiti 1970:144). Koster (2010) explains that Yorùbá men and women without children are considered incomplete and women especially are blamed for infertility and risk abuse and neglect by their husbands and in laws (see also Koster-Oyekan [1999], Maclean [1982] and Pearce [1995]). She writes that the Yorùbá distinguish between four types of infertility, namely first, barenness, never having conceived (which could apply to men or women), second, not having delivered a live birth (for which the Yorùbá word is *iya abiku*, which means ‘mother of spirit children’), third, having had a live birth, but no living children, and fourth, having only one or two children, which constitutes sub-fertility (Koster 2010:1790). Barrenness carries the highest stigma, but all the other types of infertility also have social and psychological repercussions in society (Koster 2010: 1790). There exists a Yorùbá proverb that reads ‘*Eni to ba wa si aiye ti ko biom, o wa lasan ni*’ -someone who comes to this earth without

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<sup>66</sup> Akujobi names the character of Nnuego in Buchi Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Efuru in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) as examples of Nigerian women who feel that motherhood is the only in thing in which a woman’s worth is measured (Akujobi 2011:4)

child has got nothing (Koster 2010: 1788). The reverence of motherhood in African societies is therefore far from unproblematic.

The question is what the implications of Oyěwùmí's theorising of motherhood are on a concrete level in Yorùbá society. Is it an understanding of motherhood that gives females the space to decide whether they want to become a mother? Is the power of motherhood something that persons can access and lay claim to without actually giving birth to children or becoming parents? Or does the emphasis on the power of motherhood (no matter how sophisticated on a theoretical or symbolic level) lead to the rejection and inferiorisation of females who choose not to become mothers or who are unable to do so?

What makes Oyěwùmí's account suspect in this regard is the way in which she connects the power of motherhood directly to the female reproductive function. This is clearly seen in the deification of the *Iyámapo*, The power of motherhood is celebrated in a way that is very directly linked to actually, physically giving birth. It connects the symbolic power of motherhood specifically to the actual reproductive function of woman. This is further confirmed by Oyěwùmí's statement that 'the model of motherhood is absolutely natural [...] because [it] binds women together in collective experience, it is childbearing and the mothering of children, and consequently the nurturing of the community' (Oyěwùmí 2003b:5). It therefore could easily seem as if Oyěwùmí's theorisation of motherhood renders women who cannot or who do not want children an anomaly in society. Accordingly, Oyěwùmí's emphasis on the power and importance on motherhood, coupled with the silence in Oyěwùmí's account about women who choose not to become mothers, raise doubts as to whether the approach to birth of the Yorùbá people, as described by Oyěwùmí, is able to resist the imposition of motherhood on women and the stigmatisation of those who cannot or will not take it up.

#### *a) Motherhood as inclusive category*

However, at the same time, Oyěwùmí can be read as extending the category of motherhood beyond the realm of physical reproduction when she argues that motherhood encompasses all of humanity in so far as everyone is born from a mother. It was seen that Oyěwùmí says that motherhood is not gendered, because, among other reasons, it is equally relevant to the subjectivity of all persons of all sexes. In this way motherhood is being understood as being inherent to all subjectivity, regardless of whether someone is a woman who has given birth to children. This idea is confirmed when Oyěwùmí writes that motherhood 'in African contexts' is a 'collective rather than individually constructed category' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 220). She does not explain in much detail exactly what this means, but it could be interpreted to mean that motherhood is common to all persons so far as all persons are rooted in the connection with the mother. She also describes it as an 'inclusive' category' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 220). She therefore seems to open it up to persons other than women who have actually given birth. She writes:

Humanity cannot reproduce itself without motherhood. Therefore the institution and everyday practices of mothering humanity must be a collective act, impelled by communal will. The challenge then is how to

convince society that motherhood should not be the responsibility of just one woman or just one nuclear family but should be the bedrock on which society is built and the way in which we organize our lives (Oyěwùmí 2016: 220).

By describing motherhood as a collective act, that has to do with the ‘communal will’ and which can be the ‘bedrock of society’ and the basis for how we organise our lives, Oyěwùmí seems to make her notion of motherhood much broader than only applying to women who have given birth to children. It seems like she is suggesting that although the symbolism of motherhood is connected to the birthing woman, motherhood is a role and identity that can and should be taken up by everyone in society. Accordingly, not only is motherhood deeply relevant to all subjectivity in so far as all persons of all sexes are born from a mother and connected to the mother, Oyěwùmí regards the values, practice and ethos of motherhood to be open to and valuable for everyone in society. Oyěwùmí therefore sketches a reality in which the significance of motherhood is recognised and celebrated without tying it exclusively to the reproductive function of woman. By expanding motherhood in this way, her emphasis on the importance of motherhood in Yorùbá society does not necessarily link a woman’s worth to her ability and willingness to reproduce.

#### *b) Motherhood as leadership position*

A more practical and concrete way in which Oyěwùmí extends motherhood beyond actual physical reproduction is by presenting it as a leadership category. She quotes Filomena Steady who writes that the fundamental role of mothers goes ‘beyond the reproductive and nurturing roles in households, but reflects the normative values and humanistic ideologies that embrace notions of preservation of past, present and future generations; prosperity and wellbeing of society as a whole; and the promotion of equality, peace, and justice’ (Steady 2011:22). This quote suggests that mothers, who are tasked with shaping, caring for, and educating the future generations, are particularly well equipped and positioned to offer leadership and promote justice in society. Oyěwùmí explains that ‘[a]s leaders, mothers are also visionaries, as they must constantly project into the future for the benefit of their children’ (Oyěwùmí 2016: 216). Oyěwùmí therefore argues that the leadership of mothers is informed by their serious concern for the future of their children rather than self-gain or prestige. As a result maternal values and symbolism are central to leadership in many African cultures and motherhood is often an impetus to activism (Oyěwùmí 2016: 216). Accordingly, in precolonial Yorùbá society and other African societies motherhood carried overt political meanings and political power was often conceptualised with reference to the notion of motherhood. Oyěwùmí refers for example to Jereidine Williams of Sierra Leone who ran for presidency in 1996 under the Coalition for Progress Party which was commonly referred to as the ‘Mothers Party’ and who explicitly based her leadership on values of motherhood (such as the ability to provide protection and guidance to others). Steady refers to Nancy Steele, the secretary –general of the Women’s Congress in Sierra Leone in the late 1960s, who used the symbol of motherhood and protection to mobilise support and to intimidate the opposition (Steady 2011: 23). This therefore suggests that motherhood is also a political identity which is connected to a certain style of leadership modeled on the way in which a mother care and fights for her children, but which is not necessarily directly tied to physical childbirth.

The idea of motherhood as a leadership position is not uncommon in African scholarship on motherhood. In the work of many African feminist scholars one sees that political power of woman is closely connected to her status as biological, social or symbolic mother. Nigerian feminist scholar Lorelle Semley for example uses the term ‘public motherhood’ in her analysis of motherhood among the Yorùbá. She argues that motherhood carries several extended public and political meanings that go far beyond biological motherhood (Semley 2012). Other scholars also write about the way in which motherhood has been evoked effectively in many African cultures as a political identity under which women united in an attempt to bring about change in their societies. Anne McClintock (1991, 1993) for example argues that African women’s historical role in politics was tightly embedded in the primary ideology of motherhood. In other words, the political mobilisation of women, as well their political roles and acts are based on, inspired by or driven by the values of motherhood. Examples of this include the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s in South Africa, the Igbo women’s movement. South African literary scholar Desiree Lewis (1992: 11-12), writes that the notion of motherhood through which women’s involvement in the Black Consciousness Movement was conceptualised, was very different from the ‘Western middle-class conventions of mothering’ which meant silence, passivity and confinement to the domestic realm. Motherhood for the women in the Black Consciousness Movement implied authority and active involvement in public affairs (Lewis 1992: 11-12). Gaitskell and Unterhalter write that in the liberation struggle in South Africa, motherhood was conceptualised and mobilised as a militant, dynamic and active liberatory force (Gaitskell & Unterhalter 1989).<sup>67</sup>

What can therefore be seen in the work of Oyěwùmí as well as in other scholarship on motherhood in African contexts, is that motherhood also functions as a political identity that is modeled on the relationship between mother and child, but not necessarily limited to actual mothers. In this way the category of motherhood is broadened beyond giving birth and child rearing.

### *c) The different dimensions of motherhood in African scholarship*

Except for the political element, motherhood is also described in sub-Saharan African scholarship as having other public or social dimensions. Feminist scholar Tushabe wa Tushabe who writes about Bakiga culture in Western Uganda states the following:

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<sup>67</sup> A point of criticism against the notion of public motherhood is raised by South African feminist literary critic Cheryl Walker. She argues that the notion of public motherhood could imply that the political power of woman is always circumscribed by the role allocated to them in the patriarchal regime so that it points to a ‘deep-seated conservatism’ (Walker 1995:420). Here the failure ‘to distinguish between “women” and “mothers” is seen as particularly regressive, with the emphasis on motherhood characterised as a patriarchal ploy to limit and control women’ (Walker 1995: 420). To define women’s political power with reference to their position in the family could thus be argued to keep them within the boundaries of male authority. However, Walker also offers a counterargument to this kind of thinking, namely that it is problematic to think of motherhood as necessarily a patriarchal institution that limits and oppresses women rather than being a role and identity through which they are empowered. Walker writes in this regard that she is disturbed by the argument that motherhood is a patriarchal institution and that identifying with it means colluding with patriarchy (Walker 1995:423). She writes that this kind of argument pays too much attention to dominant ideologies and not enough to the multiple and complex meanings that mothers themselves attach to their experience and how these meanings might shape their identities and political behaviour (Walker 1995:423).

In Rukiga [a language spoken in Western Uganda], the word ‘mama’ (a universally accepted word for mother) is really a synonym for *omuzaire*, which translates as a parent in English. The meaning of *omuzaire* (*omuntu* who gives life) or parent goes well beyond the biological capacities of reproduction. *Omuzaire* does more than offer an identity, it functions as a designation of status that one achieves not by biologically reproducing humans, but more deeply by cultivating such qualities and characteristics of being good in counsel, being generous and very much involved in community welfare, and having a vision that sustains community and family. Owner or holder of wisdom and knowledge - *nyinabwengye* - encapsulates fundamental applications of *omuzaire*, *mama*, *omukazi*, *omuntu*, which in English as in de Beauvoir’s estimation are reduced to the point that ‘woman’ is defined exclusively by the reproductive capacity of her uterus (Tushabe 2013:16).

Tushabe thus shows how the word for mother as used in the Bakiga culture refers not only to a biological capacity but to an elevated status of someone who partakes on more than one level in contributing to the creation of a certain kind of community. Motherhood in the Bakiga context is therefore not something inherently biological, natural, domestic, and tied to immanence as one sees in the De Beauvoirian understanding of motherhood. In terms of this understanding motherhood is not limited to a domestic life, but has public, political, creative and spiritual relevance.

Similarly, Kenyan feminist scholar Achola O. Pala explains that in Africa (and she notes that she uses the generalising term deliberately) there is a convergence in meaning of three critical and interlinked dimensions of motherhood, namely biological, social/economic and spiritual (Pala 2013: 8). Pala explains how motherhood is not only understood in terms of physical reproduction but is also deeply valued for its material, economic and spiritual essence in so far as it entails the capacity to physically produce, nurture, educate and economically provide for successive generations of society (Pala 2013: 8). Pala writes that motherhood is not necessarily tied to the institution of marriage or limited by biology but is vested in woman as a class or social category which possesses a reproductive and nurturing responsibility and quality (Pala 2013: 9). On this basis fostering is understood as a legitimate form of motherhood (Pala 2013: 9). This notion of motherhood as a social identity is widely written about in African scholarship. The argument is that because in African societies family is structured with reference to lineage rather than the nuclear family unit, motherhood is not limited to a biological connection between a mother and her own child, but is a relationship between different women and children within the same lineage structure, based on the inner logic and principles of the family structure rather than biology. In some cultures, even men can take up the role of mother depending on their position in the lineage structure. Tushabe for example describes different kinds of mothers in the Bakiga culture as follows:

In Bakiga culture, *Nyokorome* (mother who is male) - maternal uncle - takes great pride in being a mother to his sister’s children in all familial relations, nuclear and extended. *Nyokwento* (younger mama, regardless of age in relation to the biological mother) - mother’s sister - has the same status as *nyokorome*. Both *nyokorome* and *nyokwento* are expected to listen to the children in their care as a mother would, and these children seek care and counsel from them in the same way as they do their mother. These mothers are very significant in the day-to-day lives of the children: they not only participate in raising and mentoring them to cultivate the

best people they can possibly be(come), but they may also override a biological mother's decision about a child's welfare, through normally in consultation with her (Tushabe 2013:25).

Here it is clear how motherhood as social category is not only open to biological mothers. Pala argues that both the biological and the social dimensions of motherhood contain spiritual elements and involve spiritual duties and responsibilities (Pala 2013: 9). From these arguments it becomes clear that sub-Saharan Africa does provide the context for thinking motherhood in a non-essentialistic way in which motherhood is not exclusively tied to the birthing woman.

As explained in the beginning of this section, Oyěwùmí's own work runs a real risk to feed into vilification of childless women. However, if one looks more closely at the details of motherhood as it is conceptualised in Oyěwùmí's work and at the context from which she is writing, it can be said that there is scope to interpret motherhood in Oyěwùmí's work beyond actual reproduction. It can be an inclusive identity that, although rooted in the symbolism and practice of actual mothers, is open to all persons regardless of sex or whether they have given birth to a child. Understood in this way, Oyěwùmí's work could function as criticism against the way in which childless women are often stigmatised in African societies and cultures. It could be developed to constitute a set of characteristics and practices that are not necessarily limited to women who have actually given birth.

## **VII Decolonising power of motherhood**

Regarding the issue of decolonisation, Oyěwùmí rejects the idea that the white man is the 'model of freedom' and that white male privilege is that which should inform social transformation (Oyěwùmí 2016: 220). In its place she presents the 'maternal ideology' which is 'community oriented, all inclusive, life giving, life sustaining, and life-preserving' as that which can provide 'the vision and the foundation for political action and necessary social transformation' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 220). I interpret her to present the figure of the mother as opposite to the autonomous subject of reason of colonial modernity. The mother exists in relation, it is an identity that is not set up in exclusion of that which is other and it is an embodied identity with value of caring for others at its centre. Oyěwùmí explores the way in which 'understanding the institution of motherhood and its unique position in Yorùbá society can aid in the struggle to transform the lives of all Africans' (Oyěwùmí 2016: 211). Oyěwùmí therefore regards the mother, which she posits as representative of all human beings existing in relation to others, rather than the (white) man as appropriate role model and potential leader in the struggle to transform African societies. The mother who works tirelessly to secure the wellbeing of her children presents a better 'model of freedom' or foundation for social transformation than the autonomous, rational (white) male. She shows how motherhood provides a symbol of African communality and how the figure of the mother represents a visionary leader who prioritises the wellbeing of future generations above self-gain. In this sense she argues the mother to be in a particularly good position to lead the struggle for social transformation and decolonisation in African societies.

In her poignant and powerful article 'Memoirs of Motherhood: Reflections on Pedagogical Motherhood in Community' (2013) Tushabe tells how her mother, through acts of motherhood like disciplining, telling stories, teaching and caring



for her own children, but also for many others, sustained community and family and facilitated the reclamation and recovery of non-colonial, anti-colonial and indigenous imaginations through her acts of motherhood. Tushabe therefore confirms the idea that motherhood can function in decolonising ways in African societies. She describes decolonisation as the reverse of colonisation: ‘remembering community and peoples, and respectfully restoring our relationship to the universe and to one another’ (Tushabe 2013:13). Based on her own mother’s life, she writes, similar to Oyěwù mí, that motherhood is a ‘communal undertaking in the face of colonialism’ and that ‘from an indigenous perspective mothers can be seen as models of decolonization’ (Tushabe 2013:11).

What the work of Oyěwù mí, and scholars like Tushabe therefore shows, is that the mother in sub-Saharan African cultures as a figure that represents the relational existence of sub-Saharan African persons is well positioned to restore the connections between African people, and between African people and their cultures and histories. The mother, characterised by the value of care, by strength, vision, and connectedness to others, is well-equipped to facilitate decolonisation and transformation in African societies and to facilitate the reimagination of sub-Saharan African realities for a different future.

The concept of motherhood in Oyěwù mí’s work can also be argued to have decolonising power on a more abstract, philosophical level. In Chapter Three I showed, with the help of Lugones, how Oyewumi could be interpreted to suggest that colonial modernity imposed an exclusionary and oppositional metaphysics or worldview on the Yorùbá society in terms of which the relational and fluid Yorùbá subject and world were reduced to rigid hierarchical dichotomies, to which the man/woman dichotomy is central. I interpreted Oyěwù mí to understand the creation of man and woman in Yorùbá society to be inextricably connected to the construction of the world in terms of other dichotomies like human/non-human, culture/nature, mind/body and one/other. I therefore argued in Chapter Three that Oyěwù mí shows how the colonial creation of man and woman in Yorùbá society constituted a violent disruption of the self-in-relation, in so far as it is central to a paradigm in which selves and the world are structured and ordered in terms of hierarchy, dichotomy and exclusion. With her description and theorisation of Yorùbá motherhood, Oyěwù mí could be argued to put all these categories back in relation with one another. In her notion of motherhood the immanent and transcendent, the material and the spiritual and the self and the other do not exist in opposition but in relation. Asserting this alternative understanding of the mother as Oyěwù mí is doing therefore has the potential to disrupt the colonial/modern gender system in so far as it undermines the sacrificial logic that not only erases the feminine but also the colonised and through which the world is understood in dichotomous and hierarchical terms. Irigaray’s metaphysical analysis of the Western symbolic order helps to underscore this point. Irigaray’s work shows that rethinking the concept of motherhood in the way that Oyěwù mí does, has profound potential to shift the sacrificial order of Western modernity in so far as it gives rise to a notion of subjectivity in which the dichotomies on the basis of which the sacrificial order is founded, are dissolved. In other words, if we start thinking of persons rooted in their maternal beginnings, our notion of subjectivity will become relational and embodied rather than the autonomous, disembodied conception that exists in exclusion of that which is other that is prevalent in Western culture. This subject does not need an other to exclude and difference is enabled. In this way, Irigaray shows how rethinking the contemporary Yorùbá motherhood in line with precolonial Yorùbá motherhood as described and theorised by Oyěwù mí, resists and disrupts the sacrificial logic

of colonial modernity and could thereby help to open a space for reimagining the world in line with the tradition of relational metaphysics and thought of sub-Saharan Africa. It is a vision that subverts the founding assumptions of colonial modernity and promotes and facilitates a relational and non-dichotomous approach to the subject and the world.

## VIII Conclusion

In this chapter, by reading Oyěwùmí with Irigaray and against the backdrop of sub-Saharan African philosophy, it was shown that the major difference between motherhood as it figures in the work of Oyěwùmí as opposed to how it features in De Beauvoir and a long line of Western feminists after her, is that Oyěwùmí's work reflects a relational and non-dichotomous metaphysics, ontology and epistemology while De Beauvoir has to contend with and negotiate a sacrificial economy characterised by an inability to make sense of difference. The similarities between the way in which Irigaray understands and employs motherhood in her work and the way in which Oyěwùmí theorises it with regard to precolonial Yorùbá and Igbo cultures, flows from the fact that both of them are thinking beyond the sacrificial logic of Western metaphysics. It was seen that Irigaray's approach to motherhood overlaps to a large extent with Oyěwùmí's approach in so far as both of them root subjectivity in maternal beginnings (which are erased and forgotten in Western metaphysics). However, I made the argument that, like in Chapter Four, Oyěwùmí's work calls attention to the way in which Irigaray does not manage to completely escape the logic of Western metaphysics. Reading Oyěwùmí alongside Irigaray showed that Irigaray does not follow the idea of a relational subjectivity rooted in maternal beginnings to its possible conclusions. It was seen that she holds on to the man/woman dyad in her construction of subjectivity, even when it is contradicted by her pursuit of formulating a relational, non-dichotomous and fluid notion of subjectivity rooted in maternal beginnings. Accordingly, by putting Irigaray and Oyěwùmí in dialogue, I showed how on the one hand, Irigaray's nuanced metaphysical analysis of motherhood helps one to understand the significance and strength of Oyěwùmí's work on a metaphysical level, and, on the other hand, that Oyěwùmí's work is more concrete and at the same time more radical than Irigaray's work and presents interesting challenges to Irigaray's work.

Furthermore, Irigaray helps to highlight the power of Oyěwùmí's notion of motherhood as radical alternative to the dominant understandings of motherhood in Western thought and society. It contests the inevitability of the dichotomies in which the dominant Western feminist debate on motherhood has remained ensnared and challenges the way in which Western feminism has been complicit in sustaining this dichotomous framework in its theorisations of motherhood. However, at the same time, the dialogue between Irigaray and Oyěwùmí attests to the fact that there are Western feminists and schools of Western feminist thought that approach motherhood in ways that resonate with and could enhance the sub-Saharan African approaches. Accordingly scholars like Oyěwùmí are unduly and unfairly simplifying the issue of motherhood as it has been treated in Western feminist scholarship, when they reduce it to (a simplified rendition of) De Beauvoir's position. In my analysis I thus once again try to show the potential for new meaning and

understanding that can be unlocked in engaging Western and African feminist scholars in dialogue. I show that, contrary to popular expectation, there is a lot that Western feminism can learn from African feminist scholarship on motherhood, in so far as the latter provides radical alternative approaches to motherhood that highlight the limitations of the paradigm in which dominant Western feminism has been working.

In this chapter it was also seen how Oyěwùmí's work poses an important question to sub-Saharan African philosophy. Oyěwùmí, and other African feminist scholars, establish a connection between the important position of the mother in sub-Saharan African societies and the relationality or communality of these societies. The way in which the subject is connected to the mother forms the basis of the way in which subjects are understood to exist fundamentally in relation to others. The way in which the mother is completely absent from sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality then potentially constitutes a problematic erasure, similar to what Irigaray and others identify in Western philosophy.

It was also shown how the category of motherhood in Oyěwùmí's work could, with some effort, be interpreted to not be exclusively tied to women who have given birth to children, but as a category that is constituted by values and aspects that can and should be taken up by all persons in society. In this way it can be used to criticise the way in which the important position of the mother in African societies often leads to the stigmatisation of childless women.

Lastly, it was shown in this chapter that motherhood as presented by Oyěwùmí is also a category that holds great potential for decolonisation of African societies. This is firstly because the values and skills that the mother embodies are invaluable in connecting African people with one another, their history and in working towards a new future. On a metaphysical level it was argued that the category of the mother has the potential to contribute to the transformation of the colonial/modern gender system in so far as it undermines the sacrificial logic that not only erases the feminine but also the colonised. Irigaray argues that in order to transform this order it is necessary to rethink subjectivity as that which is rooted in the bond with the mother, thereby bringing the material and the transcendent, and the self and other back into relation. The notion of motherhood found in the work of Oyěwùmí shows strong overlaps with Irigaray's rethinking of motherhood and this highlights its capacity to undermine the sacrificial and oppressive logic of colonial modernity at its foundations.

In this chapter Oyěwùmí's understanding of motherhood was therefore presented as a powerful notion that poses a challenge to Western feminism, to sub-Saharan African philosophy, to oppressive constructions of motherhood in African cultures and that has the potential to subvert and disrupt coloniality in African societies.

# CONCLUSION

## I The dilemma of African feminism and African feminist thought

In this dissertation I provided an in depth philosophical exploration of Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's work through which I attempted to show the relevance of the excluded epistemological position that she occupies, and the power of its radical difference to present profound challenges to the self-understanding of the dominant systems of knowledge whereof she speaks from the margins. In the Introduction, I showed how African feminist scholarship, with its double aim of fighting for the liberation of African people just as much as for the empowerment of African women, end up on the outside of the dominant African intellectual discourses as well as the dominant global Western feminist debates. This is because these two allegiances (to the liberation of African people and the empowerment of African women) are often construed as two logical opposites in so far as feminism is regarded as a recolonising force that is alien to Africa. It was explained with reference to the work of South African feminist philosopher Louise Du Toit that construing feminist demands as purely external and in opposition to culture is used as a gesture of opposing Western or other external influences and aims at stabilising the national identity through the control of women's sexed bodies. In this sense African feminism's fight for the rights of African women is commonly made out to be 'unAfrican.' On this basis African feminist voices then remain marginal to African systems of knowledge production that centre indigenous or decolonising knowledges. At the same time, on the other hand, on account of the fact that Western feminism still often unthinkingly applies Western conceptual frameworks to African contexts (by, most notably, assuming the universality of categories like 'woman' as argued by Oyěwùmí) thereby erasing African knowledges and realities, African feminists most often formulate their feminist theories outside of or independent of Western feminist theory. The result is that African feminist voices have not been integrated in the Western or global feminist debates. African feminist voices are therefore excluded from African intellectual discourses because of their allegiance to feminism, and remain outside of global feminist debates, because of their allegiance to the struggle for the decolonisation of Africa. The absence of feminist, as well as female voices from the institutionalised discipline of sub-Saharan African philosophy was also specifically explained with reference to the way in which the epistemic foundations of the institution of philosophy are masculine and Western and philosophy is therefore a tradition that historically in principle excludes the thought of Africans *and* of women, thereby rendering the voices of African women doubly inaudible.

African feminist thought is therefore excluded from Western feminist scholarship, sub-Saharan African philosophy, as well as from African discourses on decolonisation. Through my exploration of Oyěwùmí's work in this dissertation, I have made a case for the crucial value that African feminism can have in both the struggles it pledges allegiance to, namely fighting against the oppression of African people and for the empowerment of African (but also non-African) women. In this dissertation I attempted to show with reference to the work of Oyěwùmí that the struggle for the decolonisation of African people and the empowerment of African women are not logically opposed to each other, but that they in fact enforce and support each other. This is in so far as Oyěwùmí's work shows that on the one hand,

African feminism has a crucial role to play in the decolonisation of African societies, and on the other hand, that sub-Saharan African relational thought is a framework that offers vast potential for gender equivalence.

In this philosophical exploration of Oyěwùmí's work I placed her in dialogue with sub-Saharan African philosophy and with western feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray. I used the work of Irigaray to understand in more detail the logic of the colonial/modern gender system as presented by Oyěwùmí, and its role and place in the matrix of colonial power. African philosophy was used to shed more light on the resistant response by Oyěwùmí to the colonial/modern gender system and to understand better the alternative worlds that she posits. In this dissertation I therefore constructed dialogues that traverse the epistemic rifts that separate African feminist thought, sub-Saharan African philosophy and western feminist thought. I showed how these dialogues are valuable for all the parties involved. The discussions in sub-Saharan African philosophy and the work of Irigaray highlight and help to develop the strengths of Oyěwùmí's work and its key significance in the intellectual discourse on the decolonisation of Africa. At the same time I argued that Oyěwùmí's work confronts sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality and Irigaray with their blind spots, problematic silences and the limitations of their stances. I therefore underscore the subversive power and profundity of the voice of Oyěwùmí, who, on account of speaking as African *and* woman, is rendered doubly inaudible in the dominant intellectual discourses of Africa and the West. In this Conclusion, I start by briefly outlining my reading of Oyěwùmí. In sections three and four I summarise the insights and questions that emerged when reading Oyěwùmí in dialogue with sub-Saharan African philosophy and with Luce Irigaray. Lastly I recount the main arguments I made with regard to the decolonising potential of Oyěwùmí's work, as well as the questions raised thereby.

## **II Oyěwùmí and the colonial invention of women in Yorùbá society**

It was seen in Chapter One that Oyěwùmí argues that gender is a colonial imposition in Yorùbá society which led to the fundamental distortion of all areas of life. She shows that the colonial systems imposed on Yorùbá society entail more than a socio-political reordering of gender relations, but represent a different construction of the subject and the world. Oyěwùmí famously argues that the category of 'woman' did not exist in precolonial Yorùbá thought and society and that its existence in present day Yorùbá society is a product of colonial rule in Nigeria. According to Oyěwùmí the category of 'woman' that one sees in Western thought and also in Western feminism is inevitably a subordinate one that is only defined in negative terms in relation to man. She claims that in precolonial Yorùbá society differences in sexed bodies did not translate into this hierarchy. She criticises Western feminism for assuming the existence of this hierarchical gender scheme when analysing Yorùbá society, thereby creating and perpetuating this foreign scheme in Yorùbá society. In her research on the Yorùbá, Oyěwùmí shows how, when researching the Yorùbá through such a western conceptual lens, the Yorùbá reality is erased in the process of knowledge production. In other words, by assuming the existence of certain categories (like gender) in their research on the Yorùbá, these categories are called into life by western feminists in the knowledge that they produce about the Yorùbá, even if these categories are absent in the local setting. Thereby the Yorùbá world is reduced to an inferior version of the modern western world rather than being presented as a reality that is different from and equivalent to the modern western world. Oyěwùmí tries to resist this erasure of the Yorùbá reality by rooting her knowledge claims in 'endogenous categories and epistemologies'

and by building her work on indigenous concepts, ideas and language rather than merely applying existing concepts and knowledge to the Yorùbá context. I argued that Oyěwùmí's project is therefore epistemological and metaphysical. She is firstly making a point about how our eurocentric processes of knowledge production erase the Yorùbá reality. By bracketing dominant Western conceptual frameworks and trying to root her theoretical position in concrete aspects of precolonial Yorùbá reality, she shows how Yorùbá society is founded in a different logic or is underpinned by a different metaphysics than the West. I read her to present a non-dichotomous, fluid and dynamic reality where the subject is constituted in relation to others rather than in opposition to the other. In the world that she reconstructs woman does not exist as opposite to man, nor does the self exist in opposition to the other or the body in opposition to the mind. She therefore presents an order in which gender cannot exist in the same way as it does in the Western symbolic order.

It was also seen in the first chapter that Oyěwùmí is criticised by scholars like Nigerian feminist Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003a) for the fact that, by working with a pure precolonial Yorùbá society that existed completely independently and without any influence from the west, she problematically essentialises both the Yorùbá and western cultures and ignores the ways in which Africa and the West exist in movement and in interaction with each other. By positing a pure precolonial Yorùbá society in opposition to the West, Oyěwùmí can be said to be repeating and reinforcing the colonial/modern discourse, referred to by postcolonial scholar Stuart Hall (1992) as the discourse of the 'West and the Rest' in terms of which the West constructed itself in opposition to Others. However, I defended Oyěwùmí against this criticism by reading her work as a counter epistemology of alterity through which she resists the colonial erasure of African worlds and knowledges. By asserting Yorùbá difference she aims to, in the words of Indian postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), 'provincialise' European knowledges, thereby opening a space for the reclamation, reimagination or reconstruction of indigenous Yorùbá knowledges.

### **III Oyěwùmí and sub-Saharan African philosophy**

In Chapter Two I showed how it can be argued that Oyěwùmí's feminist position shares certain core assumptions with the sub-Saharan tradition of philosophy and accordingly, how reading Oyěwùmí's feminism and sub-Saharan philosophy together could be a highly productive exercise. As I wrote in the Introduction, there are firstly, very few African women working in the discipline of philosophy and secondly, gender is almost not addressed in African philosophy at all. It was explained with reference to the argument of Nigerian philosopher Sanya Osha (2008) that sub-Saharan African philosophy took over the patriarchal foundations of Western philosophy and, unlike Western philosophy, has not really yet been forced to confront this fact. The result is that African philosophy is a tradition that is imbued with an implicit masculine bias, and that African women and African feminists choose other disciplines in which to express themselves. However, in my interpretation of Oyěwùmí, her work relates to the substantial body of work in African philosophy outlining and theorising the relational or communalistic, fluid and non-dichotomous metaphysics underpinning sub-Saharan African cultures and thought. These philosophers assert in different ways and with regard to many different sub-Saharan African cultures the existence of a fluid, relational and non-dichotomous order where identity is not constituted in opposition to that which is other, but in relation to otherness. I showed how

Oyěwùmí's description of precolonial Yorùbá society could be read to be rooted in such a fluid and relational understanding of the subject and the world. I therefore proposed an understanding of Oyěwùmí's theory about the 'ungenderedness' of precolonial Igbo and Yorùbá societies and the equivalence of all kinds of sexed identities to be founded in a non-dichotomous, fluid, relational and non-hierarchical understanding of the world and the subject. Situating Oyěwùmí in relation to the sub-Saharan African tradition of relational thought and informing, augmenting or enhancing her arguments with the work done in this tradition, gives new depth and strength to her position. It also shows that feminism is not necessarily unAfrican, but that it is possible to root feminist arguments in ways of thinking that are specifically thought of as 'African'.

However, Oyěwùmí's work also challenges sub-Saharan African philosophy in the following three ways. First, I argue that Oyěwùmí's work highlights the inconsistency of the implicit male bias of the ostensibly genderneutral relational subject of sub-Saharan African philosophy. I read Oyěwùmí's work to show the fluidity and sexual multiplicity of the sub-Saharan relational subject. The way in which the relational subject is theorised in sub-Saharan African philosophy in implicitly masculine terms can therefore be argued to be in fundamental tension with the fluid and plural nature of the relational subject. Her work therefore suggests that the relational subject of sub-Saharan philosophy should be explicitly reframed and theorised to reflect the gender multiplicity, fluidity and equivalence that relationality implies. Second, and closely related to the first point, reading Oyěwùmí with African philosophy highlights the way in which sub-Saharan relational thought has the potential to be specifically conducive to the flourishing of multiplicity in ways that are irreconcilable with oppressive paradigms like colonialism and patriarchy. In this sense sub-Saharan African philosophy could be said to have inherent feminist potential. This presents a new direction in which African philosophy could be developed. Third, in Chapter Five it was seen that Oyěwùmí links the profound importance of the mother in Yorùbá society (but also other African societies) with the sub-Saharan African relational construction of subjectivity. She very convincingly embeds subjectivity in the first relation with the mother and posits the mother, as always in relation with alterity, as the universal representative of subjectivity. However, the mother is completely absent from Sub-Saharan African philosophy on relationality. Oyěwùmí's work raises the question of whether, like in the Western symbolic order, sub-Saharan African philosophy is erected on the burial of the mother. Scholars like Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Michelle Boulous-Walker (among others) have been searching the western philosophical texts for the traces of the mother. This raises the question about the role and place of the mother in the relational subject(s) of sub-Saharan African philosophy.

Some questions for future research that arise when reading Oyěwùmí together with the sub-Saharan tradition of philosophy are therefore the following: How can the masculinist venture of sub-Saharan African philosophy be developed with reference to African feminist thought and how can it be broadened to represent the voices of women? What do African worldviews and metaphysics imply with regard to sexual difference, women's status and masculinities? And what is the role and place of the mother in the relational subject(s) of sub-Saharan African philosophy?

#### **IV Oyěwùmí and Western feminist philosopher Irigaray**

Irigaray is a Western feminist philosopher who, at first glance, represents everything that Oyěwùmí rejects in so far as Irigaray's work is founded in the idea that sexual difference is the most fundamental difference in human life and nature, and that it is universal to all human societies. It was seen that Oyěwùmí argues that it is through this kind of universalisation of gender that Western feminists erase Yorùbá (and other African) realities. However, despite this fundamental disagreement between Oyěwùmí and Irigaray, I argue in Chapter Four that Irigaray, is also a valuable ally to Oyěwùmí. I read Oyěwùmí to criticise Western thought and society for being, at a very fundamental level, unable to deal with sexual difference. Irigaray's metaphysical critique of the Western symbolic order turns on exactly the same premise. Irigaray shows in detail how the Western symbolic order and the colonial/modern gender system are founded on an erasure of (sexual) difference so that identity and subjectivity are understood as disembodied and transcendental, but implicitly modeled on masculinity, and in opposition to materiality, which is coded feminine. Subjectivity is based on sameness to a (implicitly masculine) disembodied ideal and that which is different from this ideal (the feminine) serves only as negative. Irigaray argues in detailed arguments to make the point that the Western symbolic order and the colonial/modern gender system operate on a dichotomous logic which effects a symbolic division between the material, corporeal, sensible and 'natural' which are allocated to the feminine or coded feminine and on the other hand the spiritual, ideal, intelligible, transcendental which are allocated to the masculine or coded masculine. On this basis I used the work of Irigaray to back-up, deepen and nuance the charges leveled by Oyěwùmí against Western society and thought and the gender dynamics that flow therefrom.

The overlaps between Irigaray and Oyěwùmí flow from the fact that both of them are trying to articulate a position beyond Western metaphysics. However, I showed how Oyěwùmí's work calls attention to the ways in which Irigaray's arguments sometimes remain enmeshed in the logic of the Western symbolic, despite her attempts to escape it. I showed how Oyěwùmí's work underlines a crucial shortcoming in Irigaray's position, namely that it does not take into account how the Western symbolic is just as dependent on the exclusion and exploitation of the racial or cultural other as it is on the exclusion and exploitation on the sexual other. In so far as Irigaray's theory of sexual difference aims to limit subjectivity to open a space for difference to flourish, it does in principle offer a framework for such deuniversalising of white/Western subjectivity and creating a space for the racial difference. However, I argued that she fails to acknowledge the convergence of masculinity and whiteness in the sacrificial model of subjectivity that needs to be overcome in order to enable a culture of alterity. Her work therefore shows no recognition or awareness of the ways in which the categories of race and gender intersect, overlap and reinforce each other in the sacrificial logic of the western symbolic order. Moreover, reading Oyěwùmí alongside Irigaray also indicates that, by considering sexual difference as the most pressing issue of our age and separating it from issues like race and culture, Irigaray's analysis does not take into account how, in Western colonial modernity, sex and race are interwoven in ways that render the African woman, as woman *and* colonised, doubly invisible and excluded. In so far as Irigaray is interested in what is left out of the Western symbolic order, therefore in the repressed and constitutive 'outside' of this order, the doubly excluded position of the African woman could be an invaluable resource for her. A question for future research raised by engaging Oyěwùmí and Irigaray in dialogue is therefore what it will mean for Irigaray's theory to introduce the issue



of race as inextricably intertwined with gender. More specifically, how would the double exclusion of the African woman fit into Irigaray's metaphysical understanding of the way in which the Western symbolic order is constructed? And what insights would this produce about the sacrificial logic of the Western symbolic order?

Oyěwùmí's work also raises a crucial question about Irigaray's work with regard to the issue of subjectivity. I interpreted the Yorùbá context (as described and theorised by Oyěwùmí) to suggest that if one takes relational subjectivity seriously, sexual difference is always a relationship of profound interdependence, intersubjectivity and vulnerability, also to the other sex, through which both sexes are shaped and constituted. I argued that placing an ontological divide between masculine and feminine subjectivity as Irigaray does through her concept of the sexed universal could be argued to preclude this kind of exposedness and vulnerability in so far as it isolates the subject in its own sexual identity. In other words, it could be argued that by ontologically dividing masculine and feminine subjectivity, the sexed subject is left in a way untouchable by and therefore invulnerable to its other. In this way, on the basis of Oyěwùmí's work, it can be argued that there is a tension between, on the one hand, the relationality that Irigaray pursues, and on the other hand, the sexed universal in terms of which she understands subjectivity. Another question about Irigaray's work which I argued in Chapter Four to arise when reading Oyěwùmí and Irigaray alongside each other, is whether a relational understanding of subjectivity is not contradicted by a division between masculine and feminine subjectivity as seen in the work of Irigaray. I argued that Oyěwùmí's work can be interpreted to show that a subject that is constituted in relation to others is fluid and dynamic and cannot be fixed on one side of a rigid gender divide.

This issue was also explored from another angle in Chapter Five with reference to Oyěwùmí's theorisation of Yorùbá motherhood. It was seen that Oyěwùmí regards the mother-child relationship, rather than the man/woman relationship to be the most fundamental relationship to subjectivity and society. She embeds relational subjectivity in the first relation that every person has to its mother. Oyěwùmí's work on motherhood suggests convincingly that a non-sacrificial notion of subjectivity can be thought without depending on the man/woman distinction, which Irigaray insists on. However, I showed that it could be argued that the possibility of thinking subjectivity rooted in motherhood and understanding the mother as model for universal subjectivity are ideas that can be read in Irigaray's work, but can be more fully developed with reference to Oyěwùmí's work on the mother. The question that arises in light of Irigaray's insistence on the radical difference between the sexes, is whether Oyěwùmí's work on the mother shows a way of developing Irigaray's notion of subjectivity through the model of the mother, outside of the strict masculine/feminine dyad, and as a continuing, fluid and dynamic process of intersubjective becoming?

Lastly, in Chapter Five I also showed how Oyěwùmí provides a concrete example of what a culture would look like that is not dependent on the erasure of the maternal feminine and in which the subject's relation and debt to the mother is acknowledged and celebrated. In this way too Oyěwùmí's theory, and possibly also other sub-Saharan African feminist work on motherhood, could be an interesting resource through which to develop Irigaray's ideas.

The dialogue between Irigaray and Oyěwùmí therefore offers many avenues to explore in more depth in future research. It also raises more general questions regarding the work of Oyěwùmí, African feminist thought and Western feminist thought. For example, what can a dialogue between Oyěwùmí and other Western feminists produce? In this regard Judith Butler, who like Oyěwùmí, draws into question the category of woman as existing identity central to feminist theory that constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued, is particularly interesting. Also, what are the implications of the work of other African feminist scholars, like Nkiru Nzegwu for example, for dominant global feminist knowledges? In other words, what insights can the work of other African feminist scholars yield about dominant global feminist knowledges and its limitations?

## **V The feminism of Oyěwùmí as decolonising force**

In reading Oyěwùmí with sub-Saharan African philosophy and the work of Western feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, the decolonising potential of Oyěwùmí's work, and possibly also of African feminism more generally, becomes clear. This is the main argument that I made in this dissertation. By presenting African feminist thought as a decolonising force I contested the way in which feminism is understood as an inherently Western framework that is irreconcilable with or in fundamental tension with African indigenous thought and practices. If one reads Oyěwùmí as I have done, her work presents a key intervention in this regard. It was seen that the work of Oyěwùmí, especially when read in conjunction with scholars like Maria Lugones (see Chapter Three), shows that African feminism has a crucial role to play in the process of decolonisation of African societies in so far as gender is an imposition of colonialism and coloniality which permeates all domains of life and leads to the subjugation of both colonised men and women. Her work shows that the racialisation and inferiorisation of the 'native' cannot be fully grasped and appreciated if the role of gender in the logic of colonialism is ignored. I argued that Oyěwùmí could be interpreted to indicate how the hierarchical categories of man and woman are a creation of colonial modernity which is regarded as a mark of being human which the 'native' had to internalise in his struggle to become 'civilised' or to be recognised as a human being by the coloniser. The argument is therefore that subjectification under colonial rule therefore required the adoption of the hierarchical man/woman dichotomy as it existed in the colonial/modern gender system. A project of decolonisation therefore necessitates resistance against the gender system imposed on African societies through colonialism and coloniality, based on an awareness of how race and gender work together to subjugate the 'native' in the colonial/modern gender system. Crucial to the struggle for decolonisation are then further feminist projects that explore the role of gender in colonialism and coloniality in African societies.

Moreover, because Oyěwùmí's feminist position is rooted in the same fundamental assumptions as those which are so prevalent in sub-Saharan African thought, her work underscores the inherent potential of this African framework to facilitate gender equivalence. By reading her as I do, her work can be argued to decisively deconstruct and ultimately refute an oppositional understanding between African indigenous thought systems and gender equality or feminism. Importantly, I do not mean to deny the fact that feminisms sometimes do operate in a recolonising way in Africa by relying on exclusively Western paradigms. I mean to say that there exist ways of doing feminism that are not

‘unAfrican’ and that indigenous African thought and cultures are inherently congruent with certain forms of gender equivalence.

I also showed in Chapter Five how motherhood in Oyěwùmí’s work becomes a decolonising notion. I made this argument on two levels. On a metaphysical level it can be argued to have the potential to function in a decolonising way in so far as it deconstructs the dichotomies of the sacrificial logic of western colonial modernity. I read Oyěwùmí to present a notion of motherhood that breaks through the dichotomies of man/woman, spirit/matter, self/other and culture/nature. In Irigarayan terms Oyěwùmí can be interpreted to describe a society that acknowledges its debt to the mother and that is not built on the erasure or burial of the maternal feminine. I argued that Irigaray’s work shows that rethinking the concept of motherhood in this way has profound potential to undo the exclusions of colonial modernity in so far as it gives rise to a notion of subjectivity in which the dichotomies of human/non-human, spirit/matter, transcendence/immanence, man/woman that form the basis of the sacrificial order, are dissolved. It therefore constitutes a rethinking of the world in relational and fluid rather than exclusive, hierarchical, oppositional and sacrificial terms. Oyěwùmí’s notion of motherhood is thus a notion that subverts the founding assumptions of colonial modernity and promotes and facilitates a relational and non-dichotomous approach to the subject and the world in line with indigenous African thought and in terms of which subjectivity is not constructed in opposition to and in exclusion of the African Other. On a more concrete level, I interpreted Oyěwùmí’s notion of motherhood as a decolonising concept in so far as the mother represents the values and has the qualities to restore African communities and the relations between African people and their cultures.

This exploration of the decolonising value of Oyěwùmí’s work gives rise to further questions related to African feminism and discourses on decolonisation. Oyěwùmí’s work shows how important it is that African feminists reveal and analyse with regard to their own societies how gender operates in the ongoing racial subjugation of African people. It can then be asked what the gender and sexualisation practices are that are central to the subjugations of specific African cultures (other than the Yorùbá) by the West during the era of colonialism and in the ongoing time of colonality. Moreover, if practices of sexualisation are central to colonial logic and the construction of the racial categories of coloniser and colonised, how does gender play out in the life of the colonised person? Do men and women get colonised differently? This kind of research has been done for example by Stoler (2002) with regard to the colonial situation in the Netherlands Indies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but African contexts have not yet been explored in depth with reference to these questions. Lastly, what are the implications for a community where everyone’s primary identity is being the child or mother of someone? Is it a democratising notion? What does it mean for concrete persons in concrete societies?

In this dissertation I therefore presented Oyěwùmí’s sociological study on the Yorùbá people as a philosophically rich position that works to displace the West as locus of epistemic enunciation and to open a space for creating an account of Yorùbá history exterior to colonial modernity. Her work has shown to be a critical, rigorous and creative discourse of resistance from within lived experience that challenges existing systems of knowledge in unique and unexpected ways.

## SUMMARY

In this dissertation I present the work of Nigerian feminist sociologist, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, as a decolonising force having the power to disrupt sub-Saharan African philosophy, Western feminist thought and discourses on African decolonisation in highly significant and surprising ways.

Sub-Saharan African feminist voices have been largely absent from philosophical discourse in the Western and African worlds, but also from global western feminist debates and the discourses on the decolonisation of Africa. This has been explained in African scholarship to be due to the fact that the two struggles that Africa feminism has pledged allegiance to, namely on the one hand, the liberation of African people from colonialism, neocolonialism and racism and, on the other hand, the empowerment of African women, are often construed as two logical opposites on account of the fact that feminism is regarded as a recolonising force that is alien to Africa. In this sense African feminism's fight for the rights of African women is commonly made out to be 'unAfrican.' African feminist voices are therefore excluded from, and understood in opposition to, African intellectual discourses that centre indigenous and decolonising knowledges. At the same time, on the other hand, on account of the fact that Western feminism still often unthinkingly applies Western conceptual frameworks to African contexts and thereby erases African knowledges and realities, African feminists most often formulate their feminist theories outside of or independent of Western feminist theory. Their allegiance to the struggle of the decolonisation of Africa therefore keeps African feminists outside of global feminist debates, while, at the same time, their commitment to bettering the plight of women, leads to their exclusion from many systems of African knowledge production that centre indigenous or decolonising knowledges. Moreover, African philosophy is still mostly a masculinist venture and does not engage with issues of gender and accordingly African feminists mostly choose other disciplines within which to express themselves. African feminism and African philosophy are therefore to a large extent regarded to be two mutually exclusive domains of knowledge.

In this dissertation I show how Oyěwùmí, as African feminist, who is rendered inaudible and invisible in the dominant processes and sites of sub-Saharan knowledge production and Western feminism, occupies a unique epistemological position that is rich in resources to subvert, rupture and enrich these dominant systems of knowledge. I make this argument by placing Oyěwùmí in dialogue with sub-Saharan African philosophy and with Belgian feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray.

In **Chapter One**, 'Gender and difference in the work of Oyěwùmí', I start my philosophical reading of Oyěwùmí's work by providing a detailed overview of her main arguments and by offering a critical discussion of her position. Oyěwùmí famously argues that gender was created in Yorùbá society through the intertwined processes of colonial rule in Nigeria, the translation of Yorùbá into English and the continued dominance of Western knowledge production. Accordingly, gender was not an organising principle in precolonial Yorùbá society and 'woman' as a social category did not exist. The gender duality of Western thought is for Oyěwùmí inevitably oppressive in so far as it is embedded in a range of hierarchical dichotomies beginning with mind/body, but including also culture/nature and public/private,

among many others, in terms of which the second and inferior terms are mapped onto the feminine, making of it the negative of the masculine who represents rational subjectivity. In contrast to the colonial/modern gender system, in pre-colonial Yorùbá society, Oyěwùmí claims bodily differences did not translate into social and ontological hierarchies. Accordingly, the shared fact of having a female body therefore did not automatically lead to women forming one class and occupying the same positions. Persons were classified into social groups depending on the roles they took up in society and the kind of people they were, and these things were not determined by sexual body type. Oyěwùmí thus posits a world in which bodily differences exist without implying hierarchy. In this order society is organised on the basis of the non-dichotomous and fluid concept of seniority. I read Oyewumi's work to suggest that in precolonial Yorùbá society, subjectivity was construed in plural and dynamic ways and gender did not translate into dichotomy or hierarchy. Woman, as a static being determined by her body, confined to certain positions in society and defined as the natural, passive, material negative to the category of man (to which culture, the active and the mind are attributed), did not exist.

I also defend Oyěwùmí against critics who argue that she essentialises Yorùbá society by understanding it in opposition to or completely outside of Western reality. However, I argue that her insistence on Yorùbá *difference* is necessary for the Yorùbá world to emerge as a world in its own right, rather than being reduced to an insignificant subplot of western history. In other words, I argue that by asserting the radical difference of the Yorùbá world, she subverts the universality that the West claims to represent and thereby attempts to displace the West as/at the centre of history.

In **Chapter Two**, 'Oyěwùmí and the sub-Saharan tradition of relational thought', I relate Oyěwùmí's work to the sub-Saharan tradition of African philosophy. I argue specifically that the work of Oyěwùmí could be read to share core metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition, even though she does not state this explicitly. Many sub-Saharan African philosophers have been formulating and exploring what is argued to be the relational or communalistic, fluid and non-dichotomous metaphysics underpinning sub-Saharan African cultures and thought. These philosophers assert in different ways and with regard to many different sub-Saharan African cultures the existence of a fluid, relational and non-dichotomous worldsense where identity is not constituted antagonistically, but relationally. I interpret Oyěwùmí's gender theory to be embedded in such in a relational construction of the subject and the world. In other words, when she asserts the 'ungenderedness' of the precolonial Yorùbá world, I understand her to base this on her understanding of subjectivity as deeply relational, fluid and non-dichotomous and therefore not reducible to the strict, essentialised, hierarchical and stable gender dyad of the colonial/modern gender system. Reading Oyěwùmí's work as sharing certain central metaphysical assumptions with the sub-Saharan philosophers working on relationality in sub-Saharan African societies, makes it possible to develop Oyěwùmí's thought in dialogue with this tradition and yields new insights on her position. It highlights that her rejection of gender as indigenous Yorùbá category has to do with her understanding of how the subject is constructed. As a feminist position that reflects the same indigenous 'African' metaphysical assumptions that are explored in sub-Saharan African philosophy, her work bridges the rift between firstly, African culture and feminism, and secondly, between African philosophy and African feminism. However, I also show how Oyěwùmí's theory poses certain powerful challenges to the implicitly masculine

subject as it features in sub-Saharan African philosophy, by highlighting the way in which it is in contradiction with the relational and non-dichotomous construction of the subject that is prominent in this tradition.

In **Chapter Three**, ‘African feminism as decolonising force’, I make the central argument of this dissertation, namely that African feminist philosophy has the potential to be a key decolonising force in African societies of today. I argue that the work of Oyěwùmí highlights how the imposition of Western gender systems on Yorùbá society played a central role in the workings of colonial power. She shows how gender is not just one of the areas of life affected by colonialism, but that colonial power operated and effected its domination through the imposition of certain constructions of gender just as it operated through the imposition of certain constructions of race. Oyěwùmí argues that the process of the racialisation of the ‘natives’ was inseparable from the creation of woman. I use the work of Argentinian feminist philosopher Maria Lugones to make the argument that this could be interpreted to mean that the hierarchical categories of man and woman are a creation of colonial modernity which is regarded as a mark of being human which the ‘native’ had to internalise in his struggle to become ‘civilised’ or to be recognised as a human being by the coloniser. Subjectification under colonial rule therefore required the adoption of the hierarchical man/woman dichotomy as it existed in the colonial/modern gender system. The absence of this hierarchical gender relationship among the precolonial Yorùbá rendered them barbaric in terms of colonial logic. The implication of this is that transforming the gender systems in sub-Saharan African societies is a crucial step in decolonising these societies and that sub-Saharan African feminism thus has an important role to play in the process of decolonisation of Africa. Oyěwùmí’s work shows that the racialisation and inferiorisation of the ‘native’ cannot be fully grasped and appreciated if the role of sexualisation as central aspect to the logic of colonialism is ignored. On this basis I argue that the work of Oyěwùmí offers a deep critique of the discourses pitting women’s emancipation against African culture in so far as she links her African feminist project directly to a dislodging of western power structures in Africa. Her work underscores the necessity of further feminist projects revealing, analysing and resisting the ways in which gender structures, dynamics and constructions serve coloniality in African societies.

In **Chapter Four**, ‘Irigaray and Oyěwùmí in dialogue about the sacrificial metaphysics of the western symbolic order’, I ask what a dialogue between Oyěwùmí and Irigaray can produce. I explore in more detail and through the lens of the work of Luce Irigaray the charges leveled by Oyěwùmí against western society and thought and the gender dynamics that flow therefrom. Similar to Oyěwùmí, Irigaray criticises Western culture for forgetting sexual difference. She argues that in Western society the seemingly ‘neutral’ position of gender equality can be said to be modeled on an idealised masculine subjectivity, and requires that women denounce that which makes them different from men. This means that man sets the standard for sex equality, and that equality includes occupying a similar position to man. Irigaray is interested in the symbolic structures in which this order is founded. She shows how the inequality that women suffer on socio-political levels in Western society is rooted in a specific metaphysical or symbolic system that underpins society. Irigaray’s in depth analysis from a western feminist perspective supports the claims of Oyěwùmí and deepens our understanding of her criticism of the colonial/modern gender system. The overlaps between Irigaray and Oyěwùmí flow from the fact that both of them are trying to articulate a position or envision a reality beyond Western metaphysics. However, I show how Oyěwùmí’s work calls attention to the ways in which Irigaray’s

arguments sometimes remain enmeshed in the logic of the Western symbolic, despite her attempts to escape it. I make this argument specifically with regard to the themes of subjectivity, and the relation between gender and race in the sacrificial logic of western metaphysics.

In **Chapter Five**, 'Motherhood', I explore the theme of motherhood in the work of Oyěwùmí in light of the arguments that I made in the previous chapters. I show how, in the work of Oyěwùmí, the mother is a figure through which the dichotomies central to the colonial/modern gender system and dominant western thought (body/mind, immanence/transcendence, nature/culture etc.) are deconstructed in striking and powerful ways. I interpret and theorise Oyěwùmí's understanding of motherhood against the backdrop of sub-Saharan philosophy on relationality and in dialogue with Irigaray. By putting Irigaray and Oyěwùmí in dialogue, I show how on the one hand, Irigaray's nuanced philosophical analysis of motherhood again helps one to understand the significance and strength of Oyěwùmí's work on a metaphysical level. On the other hand, I argue that Oyěwùmí's work is more concrete and at the same time more radical than Irigaray's work and raises interesting questions with regard to the work of Irigaray. I also argue that precolonial Yorùbá motherhood, as theorised by Oyěwùmí, is a powerful notion that poses challenges to western feminism, to sub-Saharan African philosophy and to oppressive constructions of motherhood in African cultures. Lastly, I argue that precolonial Yorùbá motherhood as theorised by Oyěwùmí is a concept that has the potential to contribute to the struggle of decolonisation in African societies in so far as it has the potential to undermine the sacrificial and oppressive logic of colonial modernity at its foundations.

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